The MYST Reader

MYST

THE BOOK OF ATRUS

RAND AND ROBYN MILLER

with David Wingrove

TO MOM AND DAD

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Though only *our* names are on the cover, it would be untrue to say that we wrote this story by ourselves; there were too many other people involved.

Principally, we'd like to thank Richard Vander Wende. His contributions to story development and the creative process were at least equal to our own.

Thanks to Ryan Miller for writing the first book—his contributions set a tone from which we could work.

Also, thanks to John Biggs, Chris Brandkamp, Mark DeForest, Bonnie McDowall, Beth Miller, Josh Staub, and Richard Watson for their input and output.

And finally, thanks to Brian DeFiore, our editor, and David Wingrove for accomplishing the impossible.

A special thanks to the fans of *Myst*, who've waited a long time for this history and helped it to happen. We hope it answers many questions, and raises a few more.

Prologue

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Gehn's bootprints lay heavy around the tiny pool, the lush, well-tended green churned to mud. At one end of the garden, beneath a narrow out-crop, he had dug a shallow grave. Now, as the dawn's light slowly crept over the sands to touch the cleftwall twenty feet above, he covered over the young girl's body, his pale cream desert clothes smeared with her blood and with the dark earth of the cleft.

From the steps above Anna watched, exhausted after the long night. She had done what she could, but the girl had clearly been ill for some months and the exertions of childbirth had eaten up what little strength remained to her. She had died with a sigh of relief.

Even now, in the silence of the dawn, she could hear Gehn's howls of anguish, his hurt and angry ranting; could hear the words of blame which, at the time, had washed over her. It was her fault. Everything was her fault.

So it was. So it had always been.
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He turned, finished, and looked up at her, no love in that cold, penetrating gaze. Nineteen he was. Just nineteen.

"Will you stay?" she asked wearily.

His answer was a terse shake of the head. Almost belligerently, he stomped across the surface of the garden, churning up yet more of her precious growing space, oblivious, it seemed, to the significance of what he did. She watched him crouch beside the pool, unable in her heart to be angry with him—for all he'd done and said. No, for she knew what he must be feeling. She knew herself how that felt—to lose the focus of one's life, the *meaning*…

She looked down at her unwashed hands and slowly shook her head. Why come when there was nothing she could do to help?

But she knew the answer. He had come only because there was no one else to turn to. He had not wanted to come, but desperation had shaped his course. Knowing his wife was ill, he had remembered his mother's healing powers. But he had come too late.

Too late for her, anyway.

Anna raised her head, hearing the baby's cries. Stretching, she stood, then went down the narrow steps, ducking beneath the stone lintel into the interior. The baby was in the small inner chamber. She crossed the room and ducked inside as its cries grew louder.

She stood over it a moment, staring down at its pale blue eyes, then picked it up, cradling it against her.

"You poor thing," she whispered, kissing its neck, feeling it relax against her. "You poor, poor thing."

She went out and stood against the rail, watching as Gehn crouched by the pool, washing. She saw how the pool was muddied, its precious liquid sullied. Again there was a carelessness about his actions that angered her. He was thoughtless. Gehn had always been thoughtless. But she held her tongue, knowing that it was not the moment to mention such things.

"You want me to dress the child for the journey?"

Gehn did not answer, and for a moment she thought that maybe he had not heard, but when she went to speak again, he turned and glared at her.

"Keep it. Bury it with its mother, if you must. But don't bother me with it. You saved it, you look after it."

She bristled, then held the child out, over the gap.

"This is your son, Gehn. Your *son!* You gave him life. You are responsible for him. That is the way of things in this world."

Gehn turned away.

She drew the child back. As she did, it began to cry again. Below her, Gehn stamped across the churned ground and quickly climbed the steps, pushing past her roughly to go inside. A moment later he was back, his glasses perched on his head. Anna stared at him, noting that he had discarded his cloak.

"Your cloak, Gehn…You'll need your cloak out there."

He turned from her, looking out toward the lip of the volcano, just visible from where they stood. "Keep it," he said, his eyes moving fleetingly across her face. "I'll not need it anymore!"

His words frightened her, made her fear for his sanity after all that had happened. She stared at the child in her arms, not knowing at that moment what was best. Even so, she was determined he would hold the child once before he went.

She made to give the child to Gehn, but he rushed past her and stepped out onto the rope bridge. In a moment he was gone.

"But you didn't name him," she said quietly, holding the baby tight against her. "You didn't even name him…"

§

Within the great volcano's shadow, the desert floor was fractured. There, in a crack some eighty feet by fifteen, the darkness was intense. The casual eye might, indeed, have passed on, thinking it no more than a natural feature, but for the strange lip—a wall of stone some five or six feet high—that surrounded it.

For a moment all was still, and then a tall, cloakless figure climbed up onto the lip of the cleftwall, stepping out into the dawn light.

All was silence; a silence as only such desert places possess. In the cool of the desert dawn, a mist rose from the warm heart of the volcano, wreathing it in a faint, mysterious veil. Anna watched as the tall cloakless figure climbed the volcano's slope, the mist swirling about him, concealing then revealing him again. The heavy lenses he wore gave his head a strange, yet distinctive shape. For a moment he stood there, his

head turned, looking back at the dark gash of the cleft a mile below him, his tall, imperious shape backlit by the sun that bled through the shifting layers of haze. Then, with a dreamlike slowness, like a specter stepping out into nothingness, he turned and vanished.

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The sandstorm had scoured the narrow rock ledge clean. Now, all along the sculpted, lacelike ridge, shadows made a thousand frozen forms. The rock face was decorated with eyes and mouths, with outstretched arms and tilted heads, as if a myriad of strange and beautiful creatures had strayed from the dark safety of the caldera's gaping maw, only to be crystallized by the sun's penetrating rays.

Above them, in the shadow of the volcano's rim, lay the boy, staring out across the great ocean of sand that stretched toward the mountainous plateaus that were hazed in the distance. The only thing larger than that vast landscape was the clear blue sky above it.

The boy was concealed from watchful eyes, his very existence hidden from the traders who, at that moment, had stopped their caravan a mile out on the sands to greet the old madwoman. The patched and dirty clothes he wore were the color of the desert, making him seem but a fragment of that arid landscape.

The boy lay perfectly still, watching, the heavy lenses he wore adjusted for long-sight, his sensitive eyes taking in every tiny detail of the caravan.

The storm had delayed the caravan two days, and while two days was as nothing in this timeless place, for the boy it has seemed a small etermity. For weeks before the caravan was due he would dream of them night and day, conjuring them up in his mind; imagining himself cloaked and hooded, up on the back of one of the great beasts, leaving with them. Off into he greater world.

Of those dreams he told his grandmother nothing. No. For he knew how she fretted; worrying that one of the more unscrupulous traders might come in the night and take him, to sell him into slavery in the markets of the south. And so he hid when she said hide, and held his tongue about the dreams, lest he add to her worries.
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Right now the boy's eyes were focused on the face of one of the eight men: one he often studied—a dark man with a narrow head, his features sharp and curved within the hood of his jet black cloak, his beard trimmed close to his cheeks.

Studying the halted caravan, the boy noted the changes since they had last passed by. They had nineteen camels now—two more than last time. This and other, smaller signs—new necklaces on several of the camels, small items of jewelry on the wrists and about the necks of the men, the heavier lading of the camels—revealed that trade was good right now. Not only that, but the ease of the men spoke volumes. As they haggled with his grandmother, the boy noted how they laughed, revealing small, discolored teeth. Teeth that, perhaps, evidenced an addiction to the sweet things they sold.

He watched, taking it all in, knowing that his grandmother would ask him later.

What did you see, Atrus?

I saw…

He saw the one with the knifelike face turn to his camel and, reaching across the ornate and bulging saddlebag, take a small cloth sack from within a strange, hemispherical wicker basket. The sack seemed to move and then settle.

Atrus adjusted his glasses, certain that he had imagined that movement, then looked again, in time to see his grandmother place the sack upon the pile of other things she'd bartered for. For a brief while longer he watched, then, when it showed no sign of moving, looked to his grandmother.

Anna stood facing the eldest of the traders, her gaunt yet handsome face several shades lighter than his, her fine gray hair tied back into a bun at the nape of her neck. The hood of her cloak was down, as was his, their heads exposed to the fierce, late afternoon heat, but she did not seem to mind. Such she did deliberately, to convince the traders of her strength and self-reliance. Yes, and suffered for it, too, for even an hour out in that burning sun was more than enough, not to speak of the long walk back, laden down with heavy sacks of salt and flour and rolls of cloth, and other items she'd purchased.

And he lay here, hidden, impotent to help.

It was easier, of course, now that he could help her tend the garden and repair the walls, yet at times like this he felt torn—torn between his longing to see the caravan and the wish that his grandmother did not have to work so hard to get the things they needed to survive.

She was almost done now. He watched her hand over the things she'd grown or made to trade—the precious herbs and rare minerals, the intricately carved stone figures, and the strange, colorful iconic paintings that kept the traders coming back for more—and felt a kind of wonder at the degree of her inventiveness. Seven years he had lived with her now: seven years in this dry and desolate place, and never once had she let them go hungry.

That in itself, he knew, was a kind of miracle. Knew, not because she had told him so, but because he had observed with his own lensed eyes the ways of this world he inhabited, had seen how unforgiving the desert was. Each night, surviving, they gave thanks.

He smiled, watching his grandmother gather up her purchases, noting how, for once, one of the younger traders made to help her, offering to lift one of the sacks up onto her shoulder. He saw Anna shake her head and smile. At once the man stepped back, returning her smile, respecting her independence.

Loaded up, she looked about her at the traders, giving the slightest nod to each before she turned her back and began the long walk back to the cleft.

Atrus lay there, longing to clamber down and help her but knowing he had to stay and watch the caravan until it vanished out of sight. Adjusting the lenses, he looked down the line of men, knowing each by the way they stood, by their individual gestures; seeing how this one would take a sip from his water bottle, while that one would check his camel's harness. Then, at an unstated signal, the caravan began to move, the camels reluctant at first, several of them needing the touch of a whip before, with a grunt and hoarse bellow, they walked on.

Atrus?

Yes, grandmother?

What did you see?

I saw great cities in the south, grandmother, and men—so many men…

Then, knowing Anna would be expecting him, he began to make his way down.

§

As Anna rounded the great arm of rock, coming into sight of the cleft, Atrus walked toward her. Concealed here from the eyes of he traders, she would normally stop and let Atrus take a couple of the sacks from her, but today she walked on, merely smiling at his unspoken query.

At the northern lip of the cleft she stopped and, with a strange, almost exaggerated care, lowered the load from her shoulder.

“Here,” she said quietly, aware of how far voices could travel in this exposed terrain. “Take the salt and flour down to the storeroom.”

Silently, Atrus did as he was told. Removing his sandals, he slipped them onto the narrow ledge beneath the cleftwall’s lip. Chalk marks from their lesson earlier that day covered the surface of the outer wall, while close by a number of small earthenware pots lay partly buried in the sand from one of his experiments.

Atrus swung one of the three bone-white sacks up onto his shoulder, the rough material chafing his neck and chin, the smell of the salt strong through the cloth. Then, clambering up onto the sloping wall, he turned and, crouching, reached down with his left foot, finding the top rung of the rope ladder.

With unthinking care, Atrus climbed down into the cool shadow of the cleft, the strong scent of herbs intoxicating after the desert’s parched sterility. Down here things grew on every side. Every last square inch of space was cultivated. Between the various stone and adobe structures that clung to them, the steep walls of the cleft were a patchwork of bare red-brown and vivid emerald, while the sloping floor surrounding the tiny pool was a lush green, no space wasted even for a path. Instead, a rope bridge stretched across the cleft in a zigzag that linked the various structures not joined by the narrow steps that had been carved into the rock millennia before. Over the years, Anna had cut a number of long trough-like shelves into the solid walls of he cleft, filling them with earth and patiently irrigating them, slowly expanding their garden.

The storeroom was at the far end, near the bottom of the cleft. Traversing the final stretch of rope bridge, Atrus slowed. Here, water

bubbled up from an underground spring, seeping through a tilted layer of porous rock, making the ancient steps wet and slippery. Farther down a channel had been cut into the rock, directing the meager but precious flow across the impermeable stone at the bottom of the cleft into the natural depression of the pool. Here, too, was the place where his mother was buried. At one end of it lay a small patch of delicate blue flowers, their petals like tiny stars, their stamen velvet dark.

After the searing heat of the desert sand, the coolness of the damp stone beneath his feet was delightful. Down here, almost thirty feet below the surface, the air was fresh and cool, its sweet scent refreshing after the dryness of the desert outside. There was the faintest trickling of water, the soft whine of a desert wasp. Atrus paused a moment, lifting the heavy glasses onto his brow, letting his pale eyes grow accustomed to the shadow, then went on down, ducking beneath the rock overhang before turning to face the storeroom door, which was recessed into the stone of the cleftwall.

The surface of that squat, heavy door was a marvel in itself, decorated as it was with a hundred delicate, intricate carvings; with fish and birds and animals, all of them linked by an interwoven pattern of leaves and flowers. This, like much else in the cleft, was his grandmother's doing, for it there was a clear surface anywhere, she would want to decorate it, as if the whole of creation was her canvas.

Raising his foot, Atrus pushed until it gave, then went inside, into the dark and narrow space. Another year and he would need to crouch beneath the low stone ceiling. Now, however, he crossed the tiny room in three steps; lowering the sack from his shoulder, he slid it onto the broad stone shelf beside two others.

For a moment he stood there, staring at the single, bloodred symbol printed on the sack. Familiar though it was, it was a remarkably elaborate thing of curves and squiggles, and whether it was a word or simply a design he wasn't sure, yet it had a beauty, an elegance, that he found entrancing. Sometimes it reminded him of the face of some strange, exotic animal, and sometimes he thought he sensed some kind of meaning in it.

Atrus turned, looking up, conscious suddenly of his grandmother waiting by he cleftwall, and chided himself for being so thoughtless. Hurrying now, stopping only to replace his glasses, he padded up the steps

and across the swaying bridge, emerging in time to see her unfasten her cloak and, taking a long, pearl-handled knife from the broad leather toolbelt that encircled her waist, lean down and slit open one of the bolts of cloth she'd bought.

"That's pretty," he said, standing beside her, adjusting the lenses, then admiring the vivid vermilion and cobalt pattern, seeing how the light seemed to shimmer in the surface of the cloth, as in a pool.

"Yes," she said, turning to smile at him, returning the knife to its sheath. "It's silk."

"Silk?"

In answer she lifted it and held it out to him. "Feel."

He reached out, surprised by the cool, smooth feel of it.

She was still looking at him, an enigmatic smile on her lips now. "I thought I'd make a hanging for your room. Something to cheer it up."

He looked back at her, surprised, then bent and lifted one of the remaining sacks onto his shoulder.

As he made his way down and across to the storeroom, he saw the rich pattern of the cloth in his mind and smiled. There was a faint gold thread within the cloth, he realized, recalling how it had felt: soft and smooth, like the underside of a leaf.

Depositing the second sack, he went back. While he was gone, Anna had lifted the two bolts of cloth up onto the lip of the cleftwall, beside the last of the salt and flour sacks. There was also a small green cloth bag of seeds, tied at the mouth with a length of bloodred twine. Of the final sack, the one he'd thought had moved, there was no sign.

He frowned, then looked to his grandmother, but if she understood his look, she didn't show it.

"Put the seeds in the kitchen," she said quietly, lifting the bolt of silk onto her shoulder. "We'll plant them tomorrow. Then come back and help me with the rest of the cloth."

As he came back from the storeroom, he saw that Anna was waiting from him on the broad stone ledge at the far end of the garden. Even from where he stood he could see how tired she was. Crossing the rope bridge to the main house, he went quickly down the narrow steps that hugged the wall and, keeping carefully to the smooth, protruding rocks that delineated the pool's western edge, crouched and, taking the metal

ladle from its peg, leaned across and dipped it into the still, mirrorlike surface.

Standing again, he went swiftly along the edge, his toes hugging the rock, careful not to spill a drop of precious water, stopping beside the ledge on which Anna sat.

She looked up at him and smiled; a weary, loving smile.

“Thank you,” she said, taking the ladle and drinking from it, then offered it back.

“No,” he said softly, shaking his head. “You finish it.”

With a smile, she drained the ladle and handed it back.

“Well, Atrus,” she said, suddenly relaxed, as if the water had washed the tiredness from her. “What did you see?”

He hesitated, then. “I saw a brown cloth sack, and the sack moved.”

Her laughter was unexpected. Atrus frowned, then grinned as she produced the sack from within the folds of her cloak. It was strange, for it seemed not to hold anything. Not only that, but the cloth of the sack was odd—much coarser than those the traders normally used. It was as if it had been woven using only half the threads. If it had held salt, the salt would have spilled through the holes in the cloth, yet the sack held something.

“Well?” she said, amused by his reaction. “Are you going to take it?”

He stared at her, genuinely surprised. “For me?”

“Yes,” she said. “For you.”

Gingerly, he took it from her, noticing that the sack’s mouth was tied with the same red twine as the seed bag.

“What is it?”

“Look and see,” she said, taking her knife and handing it to him by the handle. “But be careful. It might bite.”

He froze, looking to her, perplexed now.

“Oh, go on,” she said, laughing softly. “I’m only teasing you, Atrus. Open it.”

Slowly, reluctantly, he slipped the blade beneath the twine and pulled. The mouth of the sack sighed open.

Putting the blade down on the rock, he lifted the glasses up onto the top of his head, then grasped the sack’s neck, slowly drawing it open, all the while peering into its dark interior.

There was something there. Something small and hunched and…

The sound made him drop the sack and jerk back, he hairs at his neck standing up with shock.

“Careful…” Anna said, bending down to pick the sack up.

Atrus watched, astonished, as she took out something small and finely furred. For a moment he didn’t understand, and then, with a shock, he saw what it was. A kitten! Anna had bought him a kitten!

He made a sound of delight, then, getting to his feet, took a step toward her, bending close to look at the tiny thing she held.

It was beautiful. Its fur was the color of the desert sand at sunset, while its eyes were great saucers of green that blinked twice then stared back at him curiously. In all it was no bigger than one of Anna’s hands.

“What is it called?” he asked.

“She’s called Pahket.”

“Pahket?” Atrus looked up at his grandmother, frowning, then reached out and gently stroked the kitten’s neck.

“That name’s an ancient one. The eldest of the traders said it was a lucky name.”

“Maybe,” Atrus said uncertainly, “but it doesn’t feel right. Look at her. She’s like a tiny flame.” He smiled as the kitten pressed against his hand and began to purr noisily.

“Then maybe you should call her that.”

“Flame?”

Anna nodded. She watched her grandson a moment, then spoke again. “There’s a small clay bowl in the kitchen…”

Atrus looked up. “The blue one?”

“Yes. Flame can use it. In fact, she could probably do with some water now, having been in that sack.”

Atrus smiled, then, as if he’d done it all his infant life, picked the kitten up with one hand, cradling it against his side, and carried her across, vaulting up the steps in twos and threes before ducking inside the kitchen. A moment later he reemerged, the bowl in his other hand.

“Come on, Flame,” he said, speaking softly to the kitten as if it were a child, his thumb gently rubbing the top of its head, “let’s get you a drink.”

§

As darkness fell, Atrus sat on the narrow balcony that ran the length of the outer sleeping chamber, the dozing kitten curled beside him on the cool stone ledge as he stared up at the moon. It had been a wonderful day, but like all days it had to end. Below and to his right, he could see his grandmother, framed in the brightly lit window of the kitchen, a small oil lamp casting its soft yellow glow over her face and upper arms as she worked, preparing a tray of cakes. They, like the kitten, were a treat, to celebrate his seventh birthday in two days' time.

The thought of it made him smile, yet into his joy seeped an element of restlessness. Happy as he was here with his grandmother, he had recently begun to feel that there was more than this. There *had* to be.

He looked past the moon, following a line of stars until he found the belt of the hunter, tracing the shape of the hunter's bow in the night sky as his grandmother had taught him. There were so many things to know, so many things yet to learn.

And when I've learned them all, grandmother?

He remembered how she had laughed at that, then leaned toward him. *There's never an end to learning, Atrus. There are more things in this universe, yes, and more universes, than we could ever hope to know.*

And though he did not quite understand what she had meant by that, simply staring at the vastness of the night sky gave him some tiny inkling of the problem. Yet he was curious to know all he could—as curious as the sleeping kitten beside him was indolent.

He looked down from that vastness. All about him the cleft was dotted with tiny lights that glowed warmly in the darkness.

"Atrus?"

He turned, looking up as Anna came and crouched beside him on the narrow ledge. "Yes, grandmother?"

"You have a lot to write in your journal today."

Atrus smiled, then stroked the kitten, petting it between the ears, and feeling it push back against his fingers.

"I wrote it earlier, while you were in the storeroom."

"Ah…" She reached out, gently brushing the kitten's flank with he backs of her fingers. "And how does your experiment?"

"Which one?" he asked, suddenly eager.

"Your measurements. I saw you out there earlier."

For nearly six months now Atrus had been studying the movement of the dunes on the far side of the volcano. He had placed a series of long stakes deep into the sand along the dune's edge, then had watched, meticulously measuring the daily movement of the dune, using the stakes as his baseline, then marking those measurements down on a chart in the back of his journal.

"I've almost finished," he said, his eyes shining brightly in the moonlight. "Another few weeks and I'll have my results."

Anna smiled at that, amused and yet proud of the care he took. There was no doubting it, Atrus had a fine mind—a true explorer's mind—and a curiosity to match.

"And have you a theory?" she asked, noting how he sat up straighter to answer her.

"They move," he answered.

"A little or a lot?"

He smiled. "It depends."

"Depends?"

"On what you think is a little, or what you think is a lot."

She laughed, enjoying his answer. "A little would be, oh, several inches a year, a lot would be a mile."

"Then it's neither," he answered, looking down at Flame again. The kitten was dozing now, her head tucked down, her gentle snores a soft sound in the darkness.

Anna reached out, her fingers brushing his hair back from his eyes. In some ways he was an ungainly child, yet there was something about him that was noble. The kindness, the sharp intelligence in his eyes—these things distinguished him, giving the lie to his physical awkwardness.

"It changes," he said, his eyes meeting hers again.

"Changes?"

"The rate at which the dune travels. Sometimes it barely moves, but when there's a storm…"

"Yes?" she asked quietly.

"It's the wind," he said. "It pushes the smaller grains up the windward side of the dune. From there they tumble over the crest, onto the leeward side. That's why the dune is shaped the way it is. The larger, coarser grains don't move so much, that's why the windward slope is

gradually curved. It's packed densely. You walk on it as on a rock. But the leeward side…"

"Yes?" she said, encouraging him.

He frowned, wrinkling up his nose as he thought it through. "Well, the leeward side is constantly changing. The fine grains build up, forming a steep slope, until…well, until they all tumble down. If you try to walk on it you sink down into it. It's not packed like the windward side."

Anna smiled, her eyes never leaving his face. "You say it tumbles over. Do you know why?"

Atrus nodded enthusiastically, making Flame stir in his lap. "It has to do with how the grains balance on each other. Up to a certain angle they're find, but beyond that…"

"And have you measured that angle?" she asked, pleased with him.

Again he nodded. "Thirty-five degrees. That's the steepest it gets before it begins to slip."

"Good," she said, resting her hands on her knees. "It *seems* like you've considered everything, Atrus. You've tried to see the Whole."

Atrus had looked down, gazing at the sleeping kitten. Now he looked up again. "The *Whole?"*

She laughed softly. "It's something my father used to say to me. What *I* mean by it, is that you've looked at the problem from many angles and considered how the pieces fit together. You've asked all the questions that needed to be asked and come up with the answers. And now you have an understanding of it." She smiled and reached out again, letting her hand rest lightly on his shoulder. "It may seem a small thing, Atrus—after all, a dune is but a dune—but the principle's a sound one and will stand you in good stead whatever you do, and however complex the system is you're looking at. Always consider the Whole, Atrus. Always look at the interrelatedness of things, and remember that the 'whole' of one thing is always just a part of something else, something larger."

Atrus stared at her, slowly nodding, the seriousness of his gaze belying his seven years. Seeing it, Anna sighed inwardly. Sometimes he made her feel so proud. Such fine, clear eyes he had. Eyes that had been so encouraged to see—that yearned to observe and question the world around him.

"Grandmother?"

"Yes, Atrus?"

“Can I draw a picture of Flame?”

“No,” she said, smiling down at him. “Not now. It’s time for bed. You want Flame to sleep with you?”

He grinned and nodded.

“Then bring her through. She can sleep at the foot of your bed tonight. Tomorrow we’ll make a basket for her.”

“Grandmother?”

“Yes, Atrus?”

“Can I read for a while?”

She smiled then reached out to ruffle his hair. “No. But I’ll come and tell you a story, if you like.”

His eyes widened. “Please. And Nanna?”

“Yes?” she asked, surprised by his use of the familiar term.

“Thank you for Flame. She’s beautiful. I’ll take good care of her.”

“I know you will. Now come inside. It’s late.”

§

Atrus’s bed was on a shelf of rock cut into the back wall of the inner sleeping chamber like a tiny catacomb. A beautifully woven quilt was his mattress, while a large, doubled square of cloth, sewn neatly by Anna along the edges and decorated with a pattern of tiny, embroidered golden stars, served for a sheet. In a niche in the rock at the head of the shelf rested a small oil lamp, secured by narrow metal bars at top and bottom.

Anna reached in and, lifting the curiously engraved glass, lit the wick, then moved back, letting Atrus climb into the tiny space. Soon he would be too big for the sleeping shelf, but for now it sufficed.

Looking at her grandson, she felt a twinge of regret; regret for the passing of innocence, knowing that she should cherish such moments as this, for they could not last. Nothing lasted. Neither individual lives, nor empires.

“So,” she said, tucking him in, then lifting the half-dozing cat onto him, so he could cuddle it a while, “what would you like me to tell you?”

He looked away from her a moment, his pale eyes seeming to read the flickering shadows within the shelf, then met her eyes again, smiling.

“How about the tale of Kerath?”

“But you’ve heard that several times now, Atrus.”

“I know, but I’d like to hear it again. Please, grandmother.”

She smiled and lay her hand on his brow, then, closing her eyes, began the ancient tale.

It was set in the land of the D’ni, dating back, so it was said, to the time, thousands of years ago, when their homeland had suffered the first of the great earthquakes that, ultimately, had caused them to flee and come here.

Kerath had been the last of the great kings; last not because he was deposed but because, when he had achieved all he had set out to achieve, he had stepped down and appointed a council of elders to run the D’ni lands. But the “tale of Kerath” was the story of the young prince’s teenage years and how he had spent them in the great underground desert of Tre-Merktee, the Place of Poisoned Waters.

And when Atrus heard the tale, what did he think? Did he imagine himself a young prince, like Kerath, banished into exile by his dead father’s brother? Or was it something else in the tale that attracted him, for there was no doubting that this was his favorite story.

As she came to a close, narrating the final part, of how Kerath tamed the great lizard and rode it back into the D’ni capital, she could sense how Atrus clung to her every word, following each phrase, each twist in the story.

In her mind she closed the book silently and set it aside, as she had once done for another little boy in another time, in a place very different from this. Opening her eyes, she found Atrus staring up at her.

“Are there *many* tales, grandmother?”

She laughed. “Oh, thousands…”

“And do you know them all?”

She shook her head. “No. Why, it would be impossible, Atrus. D’ni was a great empire, and its libraries were small cities in themselves. If I were to try to memorize all the tales of the D’ni it would take me several lifetimes, and even then I would have learned but a handful of them.”

“And are the tales true?” Atrus asked, yawning and turning to face the wall.

“Do you believe them?”

He was silent, then, with a sleepy sigh. “I guess so.”

Yet she sensed he was not satisfied. Reaching out, she lifted the blanket until it covered his neck, then, leaning across, kissed his brow.

"Shall I leave Flame where she is?"

"Mmmm…" he answered, already half asleep.

Smiling, Anna reached across and, lifting the glass, snuffed the lamp, then stood and left the room.

The lamp was still burning in her workroom on the far side of the cleft. The half-completed sculpture lay where she'd left it on the desk, the workbox open next to it, the delicate stone-working instruments laid out in their trays. For a moment she stood there, looking down at it, considering what needed to be done, then moved past it, reaching up to take a tiny, pearl-backed case from the shelf where she kept her books.

Thumbing the clasp, she opened it and stared at her reflection, drawing a wisp of gray hair back off her brow.

"What do you see, Anna?"

The face that looked back at her was strong and firm, the bone structure delicate without being brittle; refined, rather than coarse. In her time she had been a great beauty. But time was against her now.

The thought made her smile. She had never been vain, yet she had always—always—wondered just how much of her real self showed in her face. How much the interplay of eye and mouth revealed. And yet how much those same subtle features could hide. Take Atrus, for instance. When he smiled, he smiled not simply with his lips but with the whole of his face, the whole of his being: a great, radiant smile that shone out from him. Likewise, when he was thinking, it was as if one could see right through him—like glass—and watch the thoughts fizz and sparkle in his head.

And her own face?

She tilted her head slightly to the side, examining herself again, noting this time the tiny blue beads she had tied into her braids, the colorful, finely woven band about her neck.

The face that stared back at her was pale and tautly fleshed, almost austere; the deeply green eyes were intelligent, the mouth sensitive; yet it was in those few small, surrounding touches—the beads, the band—that her true nature was revealed: that part, at least, that loved embellishment. From childhood on, she had always been the same. Give her a blank page

and she would fill it with a poem or a story or a picture. Give her a blank wall and she would always—always—decorate it.

Give me a child…

She snapped the tiny case shut and slipped it back onto the shelf.

Give her a child and she would fill its head with marvels. With tales and thoughts and facts beyond imagining.

What do you see, Anna?

Yawning, she reached across to douse the light, then answered the silent query.

"I see a tired old woman who needs her sleep."

"Maybe," she answered after a moment, smiling, remembering the girl she'd been. Then, stepping out onto the steps that hugged the cleftwall, she quickly crossed the cleft once more, making for her bed.

2

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The first sign was a darkening of the sky far to the east, high up, not where you would expect a sandstorm. Atrus was exploring the sun-facing slope of the volcano, searching for rare rocks and crystals to add to his collection, when he looked up and saw it—a tiny smudge of darkness against the solid blue. For a moment he wasn't quite sure what it was. He moved his head, thinking it might be a blemish in one of the lenses, but it wasn't that.

Looking back, he found it was still there. Not only that, but it was growing. Even as he watched it seemed to darken.

Atrus felt a vague unease grip him.

The ten-year-old turned, making his way back down the slope, then hurried across the open stretch of sand between the nearest ledge and the cleft, panting from the heat. Stopping only to slip his sandals into the gap beneath the cleftwall's lip, he clambered down the rope ladder, making the stone rungs clatter against the wall.

That noise alerted Anna. On the far side of the shadowy cleft, the top half of the hinged door to her workroom swung open. She looked out, her eyebrows formed into a question.

"Atrus?"

"Something's coming."
~~~~~~~~~~

“People, you mean?”

He shook his head. “No. Something big in the sky, high up. Something black.”

“A sandstorm?”

“No…the whole sky is turning black.”

Her laugh was unexpected. “Well, well,” she said, almost as if she’d half expected whatever it was. “We’ll need to take precautions.”

Atrus stared at his grandmother, perplexed. “Precautions?”

“Yes,” she said, almost gaily now. “If it’s what I think it is, we’d best take advantage of it while we can. The chance is rare enough.”

He stared at her as if she were speaking in riddles.

“Come on,” she said, “help me now. Go fetch the seeds from the store room. And bowls. Fetch as many bowls as you can from the kitchen and set them up all around the cleftwall.”

Still he stared at her, openmouthed.

“Now,” she said, grinning at him. “If you could see it on the horizon then it’ll be upon us before long. We need to be prepared for it.”

Not understanding, Atrus did as he was told, crossing the rope bridge to fetch the seeds, then crisscrossing it time and again, carefully ferrying every bowl he could find and setting them all around the cleftwall’s rim. That done, he looked to her.

Anna was standing on the cleftwall, staring out, one hand shielding her eyes against the glare. Atrus went across and climbed up, standing next to her.

Whatever it was, it now filled a third of the horizon, a great black veil that linked the heavens and the earth. From where he stood it seemed like a fragment of the night ripped from its appointed time.

“What is it?” he asked. In all his ten years he had not seen its like.

“It’s a storm, Atrus,” she said, turning to him with a smile. “That blackness is a huge rain cloud. And if we’re lucky—if we’re very, very lucky—then that rain will fall on us.”

“Rain?”

“Water,” she said, her smile broadening. “Water falling from the sky.”

He looked from her to the great patch of darkness, his mouth open in astonishment. “From the sky?”

“Yes,” she answered, raising her arms, as if to embrace the approaching darkness. “I’ve dreamed of this, Atrus. So many nights I’ve dreamed.”

It was the first time she had said anything of her dreams, and again he stared at her as if she’d been transformed. Water from the sky. Dreams. Day turned to night. Putting his right hand against his upper arm he pinched himself hard.

“Oh, you’re awake, Atrus,” Anna said, amused by his reaction. “And you must stay awake and watch, for you’ll see sights you may never see again.” Again she laughed. “Just watch, my boy. Just watch!”

Slowly, very slowly it came closer, and as it approached the air seemed to grow cooler and cooler. There was the faintest breeze now, like an outrider moving ahead of the growing darkness.

“All right,” she said, turning to him after a long silence. “Let’s get to work. We need to scatter the seeds all around the cleft. Use all the bags but one. We’ll not get this chance again. Not for many years.”

He did as she told him, moving in a daze, conscious all the while of the blackness that now filled the whole of the horizon. From time to time he would look up fearfully, then duck his head again.

Finished, he pocketed the tiny cloth bag then clambered up onto the cleftwall.

Flame was sheltering beneath the stone ledge on the floor of the cleft. Seeing her there, Anna called to him. “Atrus! You’d better put Flame in your room. If she stays where she is she’ll be in danger.”

Atrus frowned, not understanding *how* she could possibly be in danger. Surely the cleft was the safest place? But he did not argue, merely went and, gathering Flame under his arm, took her into the storeroom and locked her in.

Returning to the lip of the cleftwall he saw that the storm was almost upon them. Climbing out onto the open sands, he looked to Anna, wondering what they would do, where they would hide, but his grandmother seemed unconcerned. She merely stood there, watching that immense darkness approach, undaunted by it, smiling all the while. Turning, she called to him, raising her voice against the noise of the oncoming storm.

“Take your glasses off, Atrus, you’ll see better!”

Again, he did as he was told, stowing the heavy lenses with their thick leather strap in the deep pocket of his cloak.

Ahead, the storm front was like a massive, shimmering wall of black and silver, a solid thing advancing on him, filling the whole of the sky ahead of him, tearing up the desert sand as it went. Strange, searingly bright flashes seemed to dance and flicker in that darkness, accompanied by a low, threatening rumble that exploded suddenly in a great crash of sound.

Trembling, he closed his eyes, his teeth clenched tight, his body crouched against the onslaught, and then the rain burst over him, soaking him in an instant, drumming against his head and shoulders and arms with such fierceness that for a moment he thought it would beat him to the ground. He gasped with shock, then staggered around, surprised to hear, over the rain's fierce thundering, Anna's laughter.

He looked down past his feet at the earth, astonished by its transformation. A moment before he had been standing on the sand. Now his feet were embedded in a sticky, swirling mess that tugged at him as he tried to free himself.

"Anna!" he called, turning to appeal to her, putting his arms out.

She came across, giggling now like a young girl. The rain had plastered her hair to her head, while her clothes seemed painted to her long, gaunt body like a second skin.

"Isn't it wonderful!" she said, putting her face up to the rain, her eyes closed in ecstasy. "Close your eyes, Atrus, and feel it on your face."

Once more he did as he was told, fighting down his instinct to run, letting the stinging rain beat down on his exposed cheeks and neck. After a moment his face felt numb. Then, with a sudden change he found hard to explain, he began to enjoy the sensation.

He ducked his head down and squinted at her. Beside him, his grandmother was hopping on one leg, and slowly turning, her hands raised above her head and spread, as if in greeting to the sky. Timidly he copied her. Then, as the mood overtook him, he began to twirl about madly, the rain falling and falling and falling, the noise like the noise at the heart of a great sandstorm, so loud there was a silence in his head.

And then, with a suddenness that made him gasp, it was gone. He turned, blinking, in time to see it drift across the cleft and climb the

volcano wall, a solid curtain of falling water that left the desert floor dark and flat behind it.

Atrus looked about him, seeing how every pot was filled to the brim—a score of trembling mirrors reflecting back the sudden, startling blue of the sky. He made to speak, to say something to Anna, then turned back, startled by the sudden hissing noise that rose from the volcano's mouth.

As he watched, great billows of steam rose up out of the caldera, as if the dormant giant had returned to life.

"It's all right," Anna said, coming over and placing her hand on his shoulder. "It's only where the rain has seeped down into the deep vents."

Atrus burrowed into his grandmother's side. Yet he was no longer afraid. Now that it had passed—now that he had *survived* it—he felt elated, *exhilarated*.

"Well?" she asked quietly. "What did you think?"

"Where did it come from?" he asked, watching, fascinated, as that massive dark wall receded slowly into the distance.

"From the great ocean," she answered. "It travels hundreds of miles to get here."

He nodded, but his mind was back watching that great silver-black curtain rush toward him once again and swallow him up, feeling it drum against his flesh like a thousand blunt needles.

Atrus glanced up at his grandmother and laughed. "Why, you're steaming, grandmother!"

She grinned and poked him gently. "And so are you, Atrus. Come, let's go inside, before the sun dries us out again."

He nodded and began to climb the cleftwall, meaning to go and free Flame from the storeroom, yet as he popped his head over the rim he stopped dead, his mouth falling open in a tiny oh of surprise.

Below him the cleft was a giant blue-black mirror, the shadow of the steep walls dividing it in half, like a jagged shield.

Coming alongside him, Anna crouched and, smiling, looked into his face.

"Would you like to learn to swim, little sand worm?"

§

Anna woke Atrus in the dark before first light, shaking him gently then standing back, the lamp held high, its soft yellow glow filling the shelf where he lay.

"Come," she said simply, smiling at him as he knuckled his eyes. "I've something to show you."

Atrus sat up, suddenly alert. Something had happened. Something…He stared at her. "Was it *real*, Grandmother? Did it really happen? Or did I dream it?"

"It happened," she answered softly. Then, taking his hand, she led him out, through her own shadowed chamber and onto the narrow balcony.

The moon was two days off full, and though it was no longer at its zenith, its light still silvered the far edge of the pool.

Atrus stood there, breathing shallowly, transfixed by the sight, staring down into the perfect ebon mirror of the pool. Not the pool he'd known from infancy, but a bigger, more astonishing pool—a pool that filled the cleft from edge to edge. Staring into it he let a sigh escape him.

"The stars…"

Anna smiled and leaned past him, pointing out the shape of the hunter in the water. "And there," she said. "Look, Atrus, there's the marker star."

He stared at the brilliant pure blue star then looked up, seeing its twin there in the heavens.

"Is this it?" he asked, after a moment, turning to look at her. "Is this what you were going to show me?"

She shook her head. "No…Come. Follow me."

In the moment before he emerged from the cleft—in that instant before he saw what his grandmother had woken him to see—Atrus paused on the second top rung of the ladder and looked down.

Below him, far below, it seemed—so far that it was almost as if he had been inverted and now hung out over space—lay the star-dusted sky. For a moment the illusion was perfect, so perfect that, had he let go of the rung, he was certain that he would have fallen forever. Then, conscious that his grandmother was waiting patiently on the other side of the lip, he pulled himself up onto the top of the cleftwall.

And stopped, stone still, his jaw dropped, the sight that met his eyes incredible and dreamlike.

Between the cleft and the lip of the caldera, the whole side of the volcano was carpeted in flowers. Even in the moonlight he could distinguish those bright colors. Violets and blues, dark greens and lavender, bright reds and violent oranges.

He stared, uncomprehending. It was impossible.

"They're called ephemerals," Anna said, speaking into that perfect silence. "Their seeds—hundreds of thousands of tiny seeds—lay in the dry earth for years. And then, when finally the rains come, they blossom. For a single day—for one single night—they bloom. And then…"

She sighed. It was the saddest sound Atrus had ever heard. He looked to her, surprised by that sound. There had been such joy in her voice, such excitement.

"What is it, grandmother?"

She smiled wishfully then reached out, petting his head. "It's nothing, Atrus. I was thinking of your grandfather, that's all. Thinking how much he would have loved this."

Atrus jumped down, his feet welcomed by the lush, cool feel of vegetation. The earth beneath was damp and cool. He could squidge it between his toes.

Crouching, he ran his hands over the tops of the tiny blooms, feeling how soft, how delicate they were, then plucked a single, tiny flower, holding it before his face to study it.

It had five tiny pink petals and delicate stamen the color of sandstone. He let it fall.

For a moment he knelt there, his eyes taking it all in. Then, suddenly, a new thought struck him. Jerking around, he looked at Anna.

"The seeds!"

Atrus stood and, picking his way carefully about the cleftwall, stooped here and there, examining all those places where, before the storm had come, he had scattered their precious seeds.

After a while he looked to Anna and laughed. "It worked! The seeds have germinated! Look, Nanna, Look!"

She stood there, grinning back at him. "Then we'd better harvest them, Atrus. Before the sun comes up. Before the desert takes back what it's given us."

§

The work was done. Now there was time simply to explore. As the dawn's light began to cast its long shadows over the sands, Atrus climbed the side of the volcano, Flame in tow, the ginger cat intoxicated, it seemed, by the sudden profusion of flowers. She romped and rolled about as if the years had peeled back and she was a kitten again.

Watching her, Atrus giggled. He wore his glasses now, the sun-filter set low, the magnification high. Now was the time to indulge his curiosity, before the sun climbed too high and the heat grew too unbearable; and before, as Anna assured him they would, the blooms dried up and vanished.

For a time he wandered idly, almost as aimless as the tiny, scrawny cat that was his constant companion. Then, without knowing it, he found himself looking for something. Or rather, not so much looking as trying to pinpoint exactly what it was he'd seen but not understood.

He stood still, turning only his head, trying to locate just what it was he'd glimpsed. At first he saw nothing. Then, with a little start, he saw. *There!* Yes, there in that shallow incline that ran down to one of the volcano's small, inactive vents!

Atrus went across and stood over it, nodding to himself. There was no doubt about it, the vegetation here was more lush, the flowers bigger, their leaves thicker and broader.

And why was that?

He bent down and, reaching in among the tiny stems, pulled one of the plants up and examined its shallow roots. Earth clung to it. He lifted it and sniffed. There was something strange, something almost metallic about that smell. Minerals. Somehow the presence of minerals—specific minerals?—had helped the plants grow larger here.

He cleared a tiny space with one hand, then scooped up a handful of the earth and carefully spilled it into one of the pockets of his cloak. Straightening up, he looked back down the slope to where Flame was lying on her back in a patch of bright yellow flowers, pawing at the sky.

"Come on!" he said, excited now, wanting to test his theory.

§

Almost three months had passed now since the day of desert rains. Since then the ten-year-old had labored every evening, stood at his workspace, an oil lamp hung on a peg on the wall at his side, Flame sleeping on the floor nearby as he patiently tracked down which of the chemicals he had found in the sample was responsible for the enhanced growth.

His workroom was in a small, freshly cut alcove at the back of Anna's room. Working carefully, patiently, over the period of a year, he had chipped the narrow space from the rock with his own hands, using his grandmother's stoneworking tools, careful to remove the stone a little at a time as she had taught him, checking all the while for weaknesses in the rock, for flaws in its structure that might split and bring the whole wall tumbling down on them.

There was a ledge—a working surface he had smoothed and polished until the surface seemed like glass. Strange-looking technical instruments littered that surface now. Above it he had cut three narrow shelves where he stored his things: narrow cuplike pots made of stone and clay, tiny handwoven baskets filled with various powders and chemicals, the bleached bones of various desert animals, and, on the topmost shelf, his collection of rare rocks and crystals: polished agates like the pouting lips of strange creatures; a large chunk of zeolite, which reminded him of the whiskers of some exotic snow beast; nodules of blue azurite beside a cluster of bright yellow sulfur crystal; a long, beveled finger of icelike quartz, and, in a tiny transparent box, a single tiger's eye. These and many others crowded the shelf, sorted into the seven systems—cubic, tetragonal, monoclinic, orthorhombic, triclinic, hexagonal, and trigonal—he had read of in his grandmother's books.

On the wall behind his work ledge was the hanging his grandmother had made for him from the red and blue silk she had bought from the traders that time, its fringed edge decorated with tassels of gold thread. Hand-drawn pictures and diagrams—some his, some Anna's—filled the remaining walls.

His task had not been easy, not with the basic equipment he had at his disposal. Atrus had thought, at first, that the task would prove a simple one. He had expected to find, at most, three, maybe four different chemicals in the sample, but to his surprise—and dismay—it had not proved anything as straightforward. After weeks of testing, he had

identified more than thirty different elements in the sample. The vents, it seemed, were a regular cornucopia of chemical life. Nor was it easy to devise ways to test his theory. His grandmother's books, which had whole chapters on the shaping and uses of stone and metal, had few entries on agriculture. He had been forced to improvise.

§

When Atrus sensed the crop was ripe for harvesting, he picked a number of the bigger shoots—choosing a couple from among each different type—and, placing them in Anna's best basket, carried them up to the kitchen.

He stood there at the stone sink next to the window, staring out across the cleft as he rinsed the shoots thoroughly, taking care to remove all of the dirt from their roots. Down below, Flame had gone across to the patch and was sniffing the earth where it had been disturbed, and tentatively rooting about with her paw.

Atrus watched her a while, smiling broadly at her antics, then, giving the shoots a good shake to remove the last few drops of water, he lay them on the cutting board and went across, removing one of Anna's knives from the rack.

As he began to chop and prepare the shoots, he watched Flame stretch and settle among the remaining shoots, cleaning herself, the tiny pink tongue licking her paws before she began to groom her short orange fur.

"Hey you," he said, laughing gently. It was bad enough that she ate the spearmint grass on the far side of the pool, without her making a bed out of his special patch.

Finished, he took the chopped shoots across and scraped them into the earthenware bowl. They had a fresh, clean scent, like mint, though not as sweet. Taking a short length he put it to his nose, sniffing it, then popped it in his mouth.

It tasted good, too. Fresh and…

Atrus grimaced. There was a distinct aftertaste; a bitter, unpleasant tang. He ran he tip of his tongue around his gums, then shivered.

"Eeuch!"

"Atrus?"

He turned to find Anna standing there, looking at him curiously.

"What is it?"

"Nothing," he said, picking up the bowl and taking it across to the sink again. Maybe he hadn't washed them thoroughly enough. The last thing he wanted was for them to taste bad.

He felt Anna's fingers brush his back softly as she made her way past him to the scullery, then felt her breath on his neck as she leaned over him.

"They look good," she commented, smiling as he turned to look at her. "Shall I cook some rice to go with them?"

He shook his head. "No. I'll do it. And I'll make a special sauce."

She nodded, then, pressing his arm gently, moved past him and out onto the steps.

Atrus watched her go, then turned back, looking out across the cleft once more. Flame had settled now, curled up in a tiny orange ball amidst the bright green shoots. He smiled, then, pouring fresh water from the pitcher by his side, set to rinsing the shoots through once again.

§

Atrus was repairing the stonework at the far end of the cleftwall when the pains started. At first he thought it was just a cramp and, stretching his left arm to ease the muscles down that side, made to carry on. Yet as he reached up to take the trowel, a shooting pain went right through him, making him double up.

"Atrus?"

Anna was at his side in an instant.

"Atrus? What is it? What's the matter?"

He made to tell her, but the next one took his breath. He knelt, wincing with the pain.

It was like being stabbed.

"Atrus?"

He looked up at her, his vision glazed momentarily. Then, unable to help himself, he began to throw up.

After a while he lifted his head, feeling drained, exhausted, his brow beaded with sweat. Anna was kneeling next to him, her arm about his shoulders, murmuring something to him.

“What?”

“The shoots,” she said, repeating what she’d been saying. “It must have been the shoots. Did you eat some?”

Atrus began to shake his head, then remembered. “I did. Just one. I…”

There was a tremor in his stomach, a momentary pain. He swallowed then looked back at her.

“It must have been something in them,” Anna said, reaching up to wipe his brow. “What did you use.”

“Use?” His thoughts were in disarray. He felt light-headed and disoriented. “I didn’t…”

It came to him suddenly. The chemicals. It must have been something in the chemicals. And then he remembered. The aftertaste. That bitterness…not strong, but unpleasant enough to alert him.

He groaned. “I’ve let you down!”

“No,” Anna said, pained by his words. “You can’t get it right every time. If you did…”

He looked at her, angry not with her but with himself. “I could have killed you. Killed us both!”

Anna winced and made to shake her head, to deny him, but he was staring at her now, defying her to say no.

“No, Atrus,” she said finally. “You haven’t let me down. You’ll learn from this.”

But Atrus seemed unconvinced. “I nearly killed us,” he repeated, shaking his head. “I nearly…”

She reached out and held him to her, hugging him until he grew still, relaxed. Then, helping him to get up, she took him over to the pool and, kneeling him beside it, scooped up water in her hands and washed his face and neck.

“There,” she said finally, smiling at him. “That’s better.”

Slowly, wearily, he got to his feet. “I guess I’d better dig it all up. I…”

He turned, staring. “Flame?”

Anna stepped past him, then crouched beside the tiny orange bundle. For a moment she was still, her ear pressed against its side, then, with a slowness that confirmed what Atrus had most feared, she straightened up.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I…”

Atrus stepped across and knelt beside her. For a moment he was very still, looking down at the tiny animal. Then, carefully, as if it only slept, he picked it up and, cuddling it against him, took it across to where a tiny patch of blue flowers bordered the cleft’s side.

Anna turned, watching him, seeing how dignified he was at that moment; how grown up; how he kept in all he was feeling. And she knew, unmistakably, that in that instant he had shed something of his childishness and had taken a further step out into the adult world. Out, away from her.

3

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In the blistering heat of the late afternoon sun, faint wisps of sulfurous steam rose from tiny fumaroles in the volcano’s mouth, coiling like a dancer’s veils in that shadowy dark beneath the edge before they vanished in the intense glare above.

Atrus stood on the lip of the volcano, staring out across the deep bowl of the caldera, his glasses—the largest of the two pairs that had hung in his grandmother’s workroom—pulled down over his face, the thick leather band hugging the back of his shaven head tightly beneath the white cloth hood he wore. Over his mouth and nose was the cloth mask Anna had made for him and insisted that he wear, while about his waist was a thick belt studded with tools—a perfect copy of the one his grandmother wore about her own.

Fourteen now, Atrus had grown fast this past year; he was almost a man’s height, but he had yet to fill out. His face, too, had changed, taking on the harder, more angular shapes of manhood, both nose and chin having lost the softness they’d had in childhood. He was not a weak boy, not by any means, yet watching him from the top of the cleftwall, Anna noted how thin he was. When the desert winds blew she was afraid they would carry him away, there seemed so little of him.

For the past few weeks he had been setting up his experiment. Now he was ready to begin.

Turning, Atrus clambered down, out of the burning light, into the deep, much cooler shadow just below the lip. Here, on a narrow ledge, he
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had rigged up most of his equipment. Straight ahead the volcano wall fell away steeply, while to his right, just beyond a curiously rounded rock that looked as though it had been formed from melting mud, was a narrow vent. Above it he had placed a domed cap made of beaten metal. It was crudely manufactured, but effective, and he had staked it to the surrounding rock with four thick pins. On top of the dome was fixed a small metal cylinder.

Atrus reached up, his gloved hands gently turning the tiny knobs on either side of his glasses, adjusting the opacity of the lenses so that he could see better. Then, brushing a fine layer f dust from the top of the metal cap, he leaned forward and studied the finger-length valve, checking its welding for the dozenth time before glancing at the two crudely calibrated gauges that were set into the dome's face to either side of the valve. Just above each of the dials was a thumb-sized metal stud, a small circular hole bored through the top of each.

Atrus straightened, letting out a long breath. He had one chance at this, so it had to be right. If it went wrong, if it didn't work, then it would be a year or more before they could get all the parts they needed from the traders.

He turned, looking up to where two big, coiled wires—wires he had made himself under Anna's supervision—dangled over the edge of the crater. Just above them, jutting out over the drop, was a long arm of jet black stone. Two small wheels had been pinned into its face at the far end where it overhung the volcano. A handwoven rope ran between the wheels, forming a winch. Like the cap, it seemed crude, yet it would serve its purpose perfectly. To test it, Atrus had spent several afternoons lowering rocks into that maw, then raising them again—rocks many times the weight of the load it would have to carry now.

On the other side of the crater's lip, just next to where the rock arm was weighed down by a pile of heavy stones, sheltered by a makeshift tent, was his pride and joy—the beginning and the end of all this patient endeavor: his battery. Reaching up, he grasped one of the wires, pulling it toward him, drawing out enough of its length so that it stretched to the metal cap. Attaching it to one of the studs, he then repeated the process.

Adjusting his glasses, he clambered back up the wall and over the lip, out into the burning sunlight.

For a moment he stood there, getting his breath. Each time he emerged from the shadow, it was like stepping into a furnace. Nor did it matter how often he did it; every time, that change from the cool of the shade to the sudden, stifling heat of he open was like a physical blow.

Ducking under the thick cloth screen of the tent, Atrus smiled. This time he had tried hard to look at all the angles, to make sure he took all aspects of the Whole into account in his calculations.

The battery rested in the corner of the tent, against a ledge of rock. Looking at the massive thing, Atrus felt a justifiable pride. He had cut the block of stone himself and, using Anna's finest cutting tools, had hollowed it, following the design in the ancient D'ni book. Making the plates for the battery was comparably easy. Chemicals lay in abundance in the dry soil surrounding he volcano, and he had been fortunate to find a lare deposit of galena—the ore containing a mixture of sulfur and lead—not far from the cleft. As for the sulfuric acid he had needed, the one substance that was in abundance on the volcano was sulfur. Indeed, when he finally came to make it, the only thing that had limited the size of the battery was its weight.

Adjusting his lenses once again, Atrus knelt and studied it proudly. He had spent many nights buffing and polishing the stone, then, on a whim, had carved three ancient D'ni words into its side, the complex characters tiny, elaborate works of art in themselves:

Light. Power. Force.

It looked like a tiny stone house, the metallic glint of its terminals giving it a strange, exotic look.

Beside it, altogether different, lay a second, much smaller box—the explosive device. This one was made of an unglazed red clay, cast in his grandmother's kiln. Undecorated, the single, rounded aperture on its top face was plugged with a hard seal of wax, from the center of which jutted a length of thick twine which he had treated with a solution of various highly reactive chemicals. On its front face was a thick, clay handle.

Carefully, he picked it up and, wrapping it in his cloak, carried it outside. Easing his way over the lip once more, he steadied himself, one hand against the rough, crumbling wall, as he edged down onto the ledge.

Setting the box down, he turned and, standing on tiptoe, reached up and caught hold of the thick, metal hook on the end of the rope, gently

tugging at it, hearing the brake mechanism click then click again on the far side of the rim.

That, too, was his own invention.

On some of the earliest trials of the winch, he had found that the rock dragged the rope down much too quickly, and when he'd tried to slow it, the rope had burned his palms. After much experimentation, he had devised a way of stopping the supply wheel after each rotation, so that the winch could only be operated by a series of gentle tugs.

Bending down, he picked the box up again and slipped the curved tip of the hook through its handle, then turned back and, holding the rope out away from him, slowly lowered it over the drop. As the rope went taut, he moved back.

There was only one more thing to do now, Reaching into the inner pocket of his cloak, he removed the ancient D'ni tinderbox.

Leaving over, one hand supporting him against the rock arm, he held the flame beneath the end of the twine fuse on the dangling box, then, when it had caught, released the catch and stepped back.

For a moment he thought it had gone out, then, with a fizz, it began to burn fiercely.

Atrus turned and, half-running up the slope, scrambled over the rim, making for the winch.

This was the most crucial part. If the fuse burned too quickly, or if for some reason the winch jammed, things would go wrong.

Kneeling beside the brake wheel, he slowly began to turn it, listening to it click and click and click, all the while tensed against a sudden detonation, all the while counting in his head.

When he'd counted twenty, he threw himself down, stretched out flat behind the pile of stones, his hands over his ears.

…twenty-four, twenty-five, twenty-six…

The explosion rocked the side of the volcano. It had been four seconds early, even so that didn't matter, the box would have been in the correct place, opposite the fault.

Atrus laughed, then, dusting himself off, stood. As the echoes died, he could hear, through the ringing in his ears, the sound he'd hoped to hear —the strong hiss of steam forcing its way through the cap and an accompanying high-pitched mechanical whine.

Still laughing, he climbed up onto the lip and looked down. The winch-arm had gone, as had a large chunk of the ledge, but the vent—protected by the huge rock—was fine. Steam hissed from the cap in a steady, forceful stream.

Turning, looking down at Anna where she stood on the cleftwall, he raised his arms and waved to her eagerly, grinning with triumph.

"It works!" he yelled, pulling the mask down from his nose and mouth. "It works!"

From below Anna waved back to him, then, cupping her hands before her mouth, she shouted something, but it was difficult to make out what she was saying, his ears were ringing so much. Besides, the furious hissing of the steam, that high-pitched whine, seemed to grow by the moment. *Go back*, she'd said, or something like it. Grinning, he nodded, then, waving to her again, turned back to watch the hissing cap.

"It worked," he said quietly, noting how the cap was trembling now, rattling against the four restraining pins. "It really worked."

Climbing down, he went across and, taking care not to get *too* close, edged around until he could see the gauges.

Yes! A thrill of excitement went through him, seeing how both arrows were deep in the red. *It was passing a charge!*

He stood back, grinning, then felt himself go cold. Even as he watched, one of the metal pins began to move, easing itself slowly from its berth within the rock, as though some invisible but mighty hand were pulling it from the stone.

Slowly he began to edge away. As he did, the noise from the cap changed, rising a full octave, as if that same invisible hand had pressed down on the key of an organ.

Atrus turned and, scrambling up the slope and over the rim, began to run, ignoring the impact of the heat, fighting it…but it was like running through some thick, glutinous substance. He had gone barely ten paces when he tumbled forward, coming up facing the way he'd come. And as he did, the whole of the rim behind him seemed to lift into the air.

§

Coming to. Atrus looked up, surprised by the sight that met his eyes. On every side, the great walls of the volcano stretched up, forming a

jagged circle where they met the startling blueness of the sky.

He was in the crater—the rim must have given way.

Slowly, he got to his feet. Steam billowed across the rock-cluttered floor of the volcano, concealing its far edges. From time to time a figure would form from the clouds, the crystalline shapes strangely beautiful.

He saw the battery at once. Going over to it, he crouched, then shook his head, amazed by its condition. It was virtually untouched. The polished stone exterior had a few buffs and scratches, but it was still in one piece. Moreover, the dial on the top showed that it was fully charged.

Atrus laughed, delighted. Reaching out, he smoothed its upper surface almost lovingly. At least he knew now that the principle was sound. If he could only find the right vent, if he could only get the pressure right, then it would work and they would have an unlimited supply of electricity. Their lives would be transformed. The cleft would shine like a cat's eye in the desert night.

Smiling, Atrus raised his head, looking directly ahead of him. For a moment a cloud of steam obscured his view. Then, as it cleared, he found himself staring into blackness.

It was a cave. Or a tunnel of some kind.

He stood, then took a step toward it.

Strange. It seemed almost as though it had been carved from the surrounding rock.

The steam swirled back, concealing it.

"Atrus!"

He turned, looking up at Anna, high above him, silhouetted against the crater's lip.

"Come up! Come up here now!"

Atrus frowned. "But my battery…"

"Now!"

§

Walking back, she was unnaturally silent. Then, suddenly, she stopped and turned to face him.

"Atrus, what did you see?"

"I saw…" He hesitated, surprised by her question.

"Atrus. Answer me. What did you *see?*"

“My battery. My battery was charged.”

She let out her breath. “And was that all?”

“There was steam. Lots of steam.” He frowned, then. “My battery. I’ve got to get my battery.”

He made to turn back, but she placed a hand gently on his arm. “Forget the battery. It’s too dangerous. Now come, let’s clean you up.”

4

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The moon was barely up when, making sure not to wake his grandmother, Atrus crept out. Taking a rope and the large piece of sack from the storeroom, he ventured out onto the volcano’s slope.

Halfway up the slope he paused, feeling a renewed sense of shock at the altered shape of the caldera’s rim. That physical change seemed somehow linked to another, deeper change within himself.

Atrus stood at the rim, looking down the loose path that hugged the volcano’s inner slope. Staring down into that darkness he experienced a sense of threat he’d not felt before.

He climbed over the rim, moving down into the darkness, disconcerted by the unfamiliar rumbling that emanated from the depths below. A tiny shiver ran up his spine, stirring the hairs at the back of his neck.

Out on the volcano’s floor it was strangely warm and humid. Atrus looked about him, then slowly made his way across, his heart pounding, his eyes searching the nearest outcrops of rock. Steam swirled and hissed, wreathing those shapes, transforming them in the moon’s fine, silvered light.

The battery was where he left it. For a moment he crouched over it, his left hand resting loosely on its familiar casing. But his eyes were drawn to the tunnel’s mouth. Compelled, he walked across.

Then, taking the tinderbox from his inner pocket, he pressed the catch and stepped inside.

In the glowing light from the tinder he could see how the tunnel stretched away into the darkness, sloping gradually, like a giant wormhole cutting through the solid rock. It was cool there. Surprisingly so. As if a breeze was blowing from within the tunnel.
~~~~~~~~~~

He walked on, counting his steps. At fifty paces he stopped and turned, looking back at the way he'd come. From where he stood he could not see the entrance. The curve of the tunnel obscured it from sight.

He walked on, as if in some kind of spell, compelled to see where this led.

The smell of sulfur was far less strong than it had been. Other, stranger smells filled the air. Musty, unfamiliar smells.

Atrus turned and went over to the wall, placing his palm against it. It was cool and smooth and dry. He was about to move away when some irregularity farther down the wall drew his attention. He walked over to it, holding up the tinder, then stopped. Facing him a single word had been cut into the wall—a huge thing half his own height and twice his breadth.

D'ni! There was no mistaking it. It was a D'ni word!

Atrus stared at it, not recognizing it, but committing it to memory.

Until now, he had only half-believed the things his grandmother had told him. There were days, indeed, when he had imagined that she had made the books on her shelves herself, in the same way she seemed to conjure her paintings from the air, or turn a piece of unformed rock into an exquisitely carved figure.

Such thoughts had disturbed him, for he had never known his grandmother to lie. Yet the tales were so strange, so fantastic, that he found it hard to believe that such things had ever really happened.

Atrus began to back away, to head back for the entrance, but as he did he almost slipped on something beneath his feet. It rolled away from him, beginning to glow, softly at first, then brightly, its warm red light filling the tunnel.

He went across and crouched beside it, putting his hand out tentatively to see if it were hot. Satisfied it was cool, he picked it up, holding it between his thumb and forefinger to study it.

It was a small, perfectly rounded rock—a marble of some kind. He had collected rocks and crystals for almost ten years now, but he had never seen its like. He cupped it in his right hand, surprised by its lack of warmth.

Dousing the tinder, he slipped it into his pocket, then straightened up, holding the marble out and looking to see if there were any others, but several minutes' search revealed no more.

Then, knowing that time was pressing, he turned and hurried out, meaning to raise the battery before Anna woke and wondered where he was.

§

It took almost an hour for him to drag the battery back up to the rim. Anna came and helped him the last thirty feet or so, standing on the lip above him, straining on the rope, while he knelt and pushed the battery from below.

In silence they carried it down the slope to the cleft.

Anna disappeared over the cleftwall, returning a moment later with a bowl of water. Atrus sat, staring at his hands where they lay folded in his lap, waiting for her to chastise him for disobeying her, but she was silent still.

"It was my fault," he said finally, glancing at her, wondering why she had said nothing. "I wanted to put things right."

Expressionless, she handed him the bowl. "Drink that, then come. I'll make you breakfast. I think it's time I told you a story."

§

Atrus had been sitting on the ledge beside the kitchen window, the empty bowl beside him as he listened, fascinated, to his grandmother's tale.

He had heard all kinds of tales from her across the years, but this was different; different because, unlike the others, there were no great deeds of heroism, no man to match the hour. Yet, finishing her tale, Anna's voice shook with emotion.

"…and so, when Veovis finally returned, the fate of the D'ni was sealed. Within a day the great work of millennia was undone and the great caverns of the D'ni emptied of life. And all because of Ti'ana's misjudgment."

Atrus was silent a while, then he looked up at Anna. "So you blame Ti'ana, then?"

She nodded.

“But she couldn’t have known, surely? Besides, she did what she thought best.”

“To salve her own conscience, maybe. But was it best for the D’ni? There were others who wanted Veovis put to death after the first revolt. If their voices had been listened to…if only Ti’ana had not spoken so eloquently to the Great Council…”

Anna fell silent again, her head lowered.

Atrus frowned, then shook his head. “I didn’t know…”

“No…” Anna stared a moment longer at her hands, then looked to him and smiled. “Nor does it really matter now. All that is in the past. The D’ni are no more. Only the tales remain.”

He took the still-glowing marble from his pocket and held it out to her. “I found it on the floor of the volcano.”

At the sight of the marble her whole countenance changed. “*Where* did you say you found it?”

“In the volcano,” he said, his voice less certain than before. “Near where the battery had fallen.”

She stared back at him. “In the tunnel?”

“Yes.”

Slowly Anna reached out and took the fire marble from his hand, holding it up, she dropped it suddenly into the bowl of water at her side. Instantly it was extinguished.

“You must not go there again, Atrus. It’s very dangerous down there.”

“But grandmother…”

She stared at him, her normally gentle face harder than he had ever seen it. “You must not go there again, Atrus. You’re not ready yet. Promise me, Atrus, please.”

“I promise.”

“Good,” she said, more softly, reaching out to rest her hand upon his shoulder.

§

Each afternoon, as the sun began to descend and the shadows spread across the foot of the cleft, Anna and Atrus would sit in the cool shade on the low stone ledge beside the pool and talk.

Today, Atrus had brought his journal out and sat there, the ink pot beside him on the ledge, copying out the word Anna had drawn on a loose sheet. For a while he was silent, concentrating, his keen eyes flicking from Anna's drawing to his own, checking he had the complex figure right. Then he looked up.

"Grandmother?"

Anna, who was sitting back with her head against the cool stone wall, her eyes closed, answered him quietly. "Yes, Atrus?"

"I still don't understand. You say there's no English equivalent to this word. But I can't see why that should be. Surely they had the same things as us?"

She opened her eyes and sat forward, stretching out her bare, brown toes, then, placing her hands on her knees, she looked at him.

"Words aren't just words, Atrus. Words are…well, let me see if I can explain it simply. At the simplest level a word can be a label. Tree. Sand. Rock. When we use such words, we know roughly what is meant by them. We can see them in our mind's eye. Oh, what precise *kind* of tree, or sand or rock, for that we need further words—words which, in their turn, are also labels. A large tree. Or, maybe, a palm tree. Red sand. Or, maybe, fine sand. Jagged rocks. Or, maybe, limestone rocks. The first word alters our sense of that second word in a fairly precise manner. At another level, words can represent ideas. Love. Intelligence. Loyalty. These, as I'm sure you see at once, aren't quite so simple. We can't simply add an extra word to clarify what we mean, particularly when the ideas aren't simple ones. To get to the real meaning of such concepts we need to define them in several ways. Love, for instance, might be mixed with pride and hope, or, perhaps, with jealousy and fear. Intelligence, likewise, might refer to the unthinking, instinctive intelligence of an ant, or the deeper, more emotionally rooted intelligence of a man. And even within men, intelligence takes on many separate forms—it can be slow and deep, or quick and sparkling. And loyalty…loyalty can be the blind loyalty of a soldier to his commander, or the stubborn loyalty of a wife to a man who has wronged her. Or…"

She saw he was smiling. "What is it?"

He handed her the loose sheet back. "I think I see. At least, I think I know what you were going to say."

Anna found herself grinning, pleased, as ever, by his quickness, his perceptiveness. Atrus rarely needed to be told a thing twice, and often, as now, he was way ahead of her.

"Go on," she said.

Atrus hesitated, tilting his head slightly, as he always did when he was thinking. Then, choosing his words carefully, he began. "Well, just as those words that describe ideas are a level above the words that are simple descriptive labels, so there's a farther, more complex level above that. One which this D'ni word functions on."

"Yes, and?"

"I see that, but…" He frowned, then shook his head. "What I can't see is what could be more complex than ideas. I can't picture in my head what that higher level might be."

"And that's precisely why there is no English equivalent for this."

"Yes, but…what does it *mean?*"

"This word—this particular D'ni word—is to do with the circulation of the air. With wind patterns and humidity."

Atrus stared at her now, his brow knitted. "But…but surely such a word would be a label?"

"No. Not this word. This word does more than simply describe."

"Then…" But he clearly could not see what she was driving at. He looked to her, his pale eyes pleading for an explanation.

Anna laughed. "You must just accept that there is such a level, Atrus."

"But you said…"

"I know what I said, and I still mean it. You must question everything and find the truth in it. But this once you must simply accept what I'm telling you. There is something beyond labels and ideas. Something which is a synthesis of the two. Something the D'ni discovered many, many years ago, and learned to put into words. One day you will understand more clearly, but for now…"

She could see Atrus was unhappy with that. He had been taught to question everything. To look with his own eyes, and quantify, and check. He had been taught never to accept things simply because he had been told they were true. And now…well, now she was asking him to break the habit of his thought.

I should not have had him draw that word, she thought, wondering at the instinct which had made her do it. *He is not yet ready for the Garo-hevtee*. Yet generally she trusted her instincts. Generally they were proved right.

As he looked away, she could see how he was still struggling with the notion of how an idea could also be a label, how something so general could yet be specific and descriptive, and part of her wanted to put him out of his misery and tell him. But he wasn't ready yet.

Anna stood and stretched, then looked about her at the orderliness of the cleft. Sometimes, in her imaginings, she thought of the cleft and of her grandson's mind in much the same vein, as if the one were a metaphor for the other. Yet at that moment she understood the inadequacy of the comparison, for just as one day he would outgrow this tiny living space and venture out into the world, so his thoughts and speculations were certain one day to outgrow her careful nurturing of them.

Looking at him, she knew he was destined to be greater than herself. Wiser, more formidable of mind. Yet the thought did not scare her or make her envious. If anything, it made her sad, for she got great pleasure from teaching him, and to think of losing that…

Anna sighed, then, picking her way carefully across the cleft, mounted the steps. It was time to make supper.

§

A full month passed and as the moon came round to full once more, Atrus made his way idly up the slope, whistling to himself—one of the songs Anna had taught him as a child: a D'ni song that had the simplest of tunes. And as he whistled, he heard Anna's voice in his head, softly singing the refrain.

As he came to the end of it he looked up, and stopped dead, staring openmouthed at the sight that met his eyes.

Ahead of him, the whole of the upper slope was wreathed in a thick cloud of brilliantly white vapor, as if a thick curtain had suddenly been dropped over the volcano's edge. The mist slowly roiled, like the steam on the surface of a cooking pot, neither advancing nor retreating, yet turning in upon itself constantly.

It was so strange, so unlike anything Atrus had ever seen, that he stepped back, suddenly afraid. And as he did, a man stepped from within that glistening whiteness, seeming for a moment almost to be a part of it; a tall, unearthly figure with a large forehead and a strong, straight nose, over the bridge of which were strapped a pair of glasses identical to Atrus's own. A white cloak flapped out behind the stranger, giving him the appearance of some great mythical king.

Rooted to the spot, Atrus watched the stranger walk down the slope toward him, his fear transformed to awe by the strength and energy, the controlled power and cold assurance of the creature who approached.

Atrus staggered back, astonished. Above him, the figure stopped and, lifting the thick lenses that covered his eyes, squinted down at Atrus.

"I see you have my glasses."

Atrus stared, unable to answer. The man who stood above him was as pale as the moon, his hair as white as bleached marble, and the irises of his eyes were huge, a thin circle of pale green about them. His cheekbones were finely chiseled and yet strong, his hands both delicate and powerful. Everything about him—from the cut of his clothes to his aristocratic demeanor—spoke of an innate strength allied to an effortless elegance. He seemed old, cerainly, but in a timeless way that reminded Atrus of his grandmother.

He stared back at Atrus, as an eagle stares, then spoke again. "Well, boy? Have you no greeting for your father?"

"My…" Recognition hit Atrus like a physical blow. He shook his head. "I…"

"What's your name?"

"Atrus…"

"Atrus…of course…" The man stretched out a hand and placed it on Atrus's head, the contact like an electric shock. "And I am Gehn, son of Atrus."

Atrus swallowed. He was dreaming. For certain he was dreaming. Nervously he touched his tongue against his upper lip, feeling the hard, salty shape of a grit of sand.

No. Not a dream.

"Gehn," Atrus said softly, echoing the word.

The stranger nodded, then removed his hand. "Good. Now go and inform your grandmother that she has a visitor."

§

Atrus ran down the moonlit slope, calling to Anna loudly as he ran, the dust flying up behind him. As he came to the cleftwall, he almost vaulted it, forgetting to remove his sandals.

“Grandmother! Grandmother!”

Her head poked from the kitchen window, startled. “What’s happened?”

Atrus stood on the swaying bridge, breathless, gasping his answer. “A stranger’s come! He sent me on ahead!”

Anna’s mouth fell open. “Gehn…” she said, almost whispering the word. Then, collecting herself, she ducked back inside. There was the sound of a metal bowl falling against the stone floor, and then the outside door flew open. Barefoot, she hurried down the steps that hugged the wall, her haste surprising Atrus.

“Grandmother?”

But she barely seemed to heed him as she circled the narrow rim of the inner wall and began to climb the rung ladder.

Atrus turned, watching as she clambered up onto the cleftwall, even as the stranger with the ash-white hair, the man who called himself his father, strode across and stopped, barely ten feet from the cleft.

“Mother?” he asked quietly, tilting his head slightly.

“Gehn,” she said once more, hesitating. Then she stepped closer, hugging him tightly. “Where have you been, my son? Why in the Maker’s name did you not come back?”

But Atrus, watching, noticed how the warmth of her embrace was not reciprocated, how lightly the stranger’s hands touched her shoulders, how distant he was as he stepped back from her, like a great lord from one of the tales.

“I came to see the child,” he said, as if he’d not heard her. “I came to see my son.”

§

Atrus lay sprawled out on his belly on top of the cleftwall, staring across at the shadowed rectangle of the kitchen, and at the bright square of

the window in which Anna and the newcomer were framed. Though the two had been talking for some while now, little of real importance had been said. Even so, there was a strange tension between them. Anna, particularly, seemed to be walking on eggshells, afraid to say too much, yet keen to know where Gehn had been and what he had done. By comparison, Gehn was relatively taciturn, ignoring her questions when it suited him not to answer them.

Just now, Gehn was sitting on the polished stone ledge, to the right of the tiny galley kitchen, beside the door, his booted feet spread wide, his long, delicate hands resting on his knees, as he looked up at Anna. He had removed his cloak. Beneath it he wore a close-cut suit of midnight blue, the jacket edged with scarlet and decorated with a pattern of repeated symbols in red and green and yellow. It was so rich, so marvelous, Atrus could barely keep his eyes from it. But there were other fantastic things to be seen, not least of which was the pipe that lay beside him on the ledge.

The bottom of the pipe was a hollowed wooden bowl, from which a shaped glass stock, trimmed with silver, led to a curved copper mouthpiece. A tiny domed cap was set into the bowl in front of the stock, while at the center of the bowl, feeding into the glass of the stock, was a thick silver spindle.

As Atrus watched, Gehn took a tiny glass sphere from a pouch in the thick leather belt he wore. Turning it upside down, Gehn shook it gently, revealing a clear liquid that moved slowly, glutinously, its surface reflecting the yellow lamplight like oil.

Resting the sphere on his knees, Gehn unscrewed the lid to the spindle and set it aside, then poured a tiny amount of the liquid into the stock and replaced the lid. Then, taking a small leather bag from his jacket pocket, he took something from inside.

Atrus gasped. It looked like the marble he had found earlier. Gehn placed it within the domed cap.

Anna turned from where she stood and looked at Gehn. “Will you be staying long?”

Gehn glanced at her, then replaced the lid of the cap. “No. I have to leave tomorrow,” he answered, his voice heavily accented.

“Ah…” There was regret in Anna’s voice; hurt in those dark, familiar eyes. “It’s just that…well, I thought you might stay with Atrus a

while. Get to know him, perhaps. He's a good boy. You'd be proud of him. And after all…"

Gehn tightened the cap and looked up at her, his face expressionless. "I intend to take him with me."

Anna turned, facing him, shock in her face. "With you?"

Atrus, watching from the darkness, felt his pulse quicken, his mouth grow dry. His heart was thudding in his chest.

Gehn lifted the pipe, staring at it, then cupped it between his hands and pressed this thumb down on the silver spindle. There was a snapping sound and the pipe seemed to come alive, burning briefly with a fierce blue light. After a moment, that same light filled the whole of the stock, making the strange, oil-like liquid gently bubble.

In that strange, unearthly light, Gehn's face seemed very different, the shadows inverted.

"Yes," he answered, meeting Anna's eyes. "Have you a problem with that?"

"But Atrus belongs *here*…"

"*Here?*" There was incredulity in Gehn's voice. "And where is *here?* Nowhere, that is where. A hole in the ground, that's all this is. Yes, and that's all it will *ever* be. This is no place for a son of mine. No place at all."

Anna fell silent, watching Gehn as he lifted the copper mouthpiece to his mouth and inhaled, the muscles in her cheek twitching oddly. Then spoke again, quieter than before, yet with a firmness Atrus recognized at once. "But he's not ready yet. He's too young. There's so much he has to learn…"

Taking the pipe from his mouth, Gehn interrupted her. "Of course Atrus is ready. Why, he is exactly the age I was when I first left here. And as for his education, that is the very reason I returned, so that I could teach him."

"You?"

Anna's tone was incredulous, yet Gehn seemed indifferent to her criticism. "Who better? I am, at least, educated to the task. And I am his father."

"Gehn set the pipe down and leaned toward Anna, frowning. "You *did* tell him about me?"

She looked away, a tightness in her face.

Gehn stood, angry now. “You mean you told him *nothing?* Kerath damn you, woman! How *could* you?”

Anna kept her voice low, conscious of Atrus outside, listening. “And what was I to say? That his father left the very hour he was born? That he didn’t even care enough to *name* him?”

“I would have called him Atrus. You know that.”

She turned back, glaring at him, suddenly, explosively angry. “Yes, but you didn’t! *I* did. Yes, and *I* raised him. *Me*, Gehn, not you. And now you want him back, as though he were a parcel you’d left with me for safekeeping! But boys aren’t parcels, Gehn! They’re living, growing things. And Atrus hasn’t finished his growing.”

“I shall decide that,” he said gruffly. “Besides, he can help me with my studies. Be my assistant.”

“Your assistant?”

“In my researches. I have need of a willing helper, and the boy seems willing enough.”

“Researches into what?”

“Into the D’ni culture.”

“The D’ni?” Anna laughed bitterly. “All that has gone. Don’t you understand that yet?”

“No,” he answered, drawing himself up, a note of pride entering his voice. “You are wrong. That is where I have been these past fourteen years. In D’no. Researching, studying, seeking out the great and mighty secrets of the D’ni culture.” He gave a single, dignified nod. “I tell you, none of it was lost. It is still all there.”

Atrus, watching, felt a shiver go down his spine, a tiny ripple of disbelief making him feel, for that instant, that he was in a dream.

Still there? But that was impossible, surely?

Anna shook her head dismissively. “No, Gehn. You forget. I’ve seen it with these eyes. It’s gone. Destroyed. Can’t you accept that? Can’t you forget the past?”

Gehn stared back at her coldly, imperiously, accepting nothing. “Oh, I can easily believe that *you* would like to forget it!”

She stared back at him silently.

“You never valued it, did you?” he continued, not sparing her. “You never cared for it the way *I* cared. But I am not having that for my son. I want him to know about his past. I want him to be proud of it, the way *I*

am proud of it." He bristled with indignation. "I shall not betray *him* the way you betrayed *me!*"

"Gehn! How can you say that? I did my best for you!"

"Your *best?* And how good *was* your best? This hole in the ground you call a home? Is *this* your best?"

Anna looked away. "Atrus should decide. You can't just take him."

Gehn leaned right in to her, his face only inches from her own. "Of course I can. I am the boy's father. It is my right."

"Then let me come with you. Let me look after the boy while you are teaching him."

Gehn shook his head. "That would not be right. It would not be the D'ni way. Or do you forget that also? Do you forget how you gave me up to the Guild when I was but four years old?"

"But…"

His voice overrode hers harshly. "But nothing. He is coming with me and that is that. If you wish to help, you might pack a knapsack for him for the journey. Not that he'll need much."

"But Gehn…" She reached out to touch his arm, but he pulled away from her. Turning, Gehn reached down and picked up his pipe, then, tugging open the door, he stepped out, into the open air.

For a moment he stood there, turned away from where Atrus lay, drawing on his pipe, the light from the kitchen making a silhouette of him, then he turned back, his chest and arms and face revealed in the faint blue glow of the pipe.

"Atrus?" he said, speaking to the boy where he lay on his belly on the cleftwall. "Go to bed now and get some sleep. We shall be leaving early in the morning."

5

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Crouching beside his mother's grave, Atrus leaned across and, careful not to disturb the earth, plucked one of the delicate blue flowers. Placing it in the journal he had open on his knee. He closed the book gently, then slipped it into the small leather knapsack at his side.

For a moment he simply stared, taking in the sight. In the half-light he could not discern their proper color, yet he had only to close his
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eyes and he could see the flowers in the sunlight, like a quilt of lilac lain on that bed of rich, dark earth.

Goodbye, she said silently.

To be truthful, Atrus did not really know what to feel. "Excitement? Certainly, the prospect of traveling—of seeing D'ni—thrilled him, yet the thought of leaving here, of leaving Anna, frightened him. Too much had happened far too quickly. He felt torn.

"Atrus! Come now. We must go."

He turned, looking across at the figure silhouetted against the dawn light at the far end of the cleftwall, and nodded.

Anna was waiting for him close by. Embracing her, he felt a kind of panic, a fear of not seeing her again, well up in him. She must have sensed it, for, squeezing him tightly, she then moved back, away from him, holding his upper arms and smiling at him.

"Don't worry now," she said softly. "I'll be all right. The store's full and what with all those improvements you've made for me, I'll not know what to do with myself half the time."

Her kind face lit with a smile. "Besides, your father has promised me he'll bring you back three months from now to visit."

"Three months?" The news cheered him immensely.

"Yes, so you must not worry."

She reached down, then handed him his pack. He had watched her earlier, selecting various items from their meager store and placing them into the pack for his journey, including all of the tiny cakes she had cooked only the previous day. Atrus stared at the pack, his fingers brushing lightly against its brightly embroidered cloth, moved by the simple care she took over everything, knowing he would miss that.

"Now listen to me, Atrus."

Atrus looked up, surprised by how serious her voice suddenly was. "Yes, grandmother?"

Her dark, intelligent eyes searched his. "You must remember what you have learned here, Atrus. I have tried to teach you the mechanics of the earth and stars; the ways of science and the workings of nature. I have tried to teach you what is good and what is to be valued, truths which cannot be shaken or changed. This knowledge is from the Maker. Take it with you and weigh everything your father teaches you against it."

Anna paused, then leaned in toward him slightly, lowering her voice. “I no longer know him, but I know you, Atrus. Measure your own deeds against the truths I have taught you. If you act for self-gain then no good can come of it. If you act selflessly, then you act well for all and you must not be afraid.”

Anna moved back, smiling once more. “The journey down will be long and hard but I want you to be brave, Atrus. More than that, I want you to be truthful. To be a better son to your father than fate allowed him to be with his.”

“I don’t understand…” he began, but she shook her head, as if it didn’t matter.

“Do what your father asks. But most of all, Atrus, do not violate what is in your nature. You understand me?”

“I think so, grandmother.”

“Then I have no fears for you.”

He embraced her again, gripping her tightly and kissing her neck. Then, turning from her, he climbed the steps and crossed the rope bridge.

At the cleftwall he turned, looking back at her, his eyes briefly taking in the familiar sights of the cleft, its shape like a scar in his memory. Anna had climbed the steps and now stood on the narrow balcony outside her room. Lifting an arm, she waved.

“Take care on your journey down. I’ll see you in three months.”

Atrus waved back, then, heaving a deep sigh, turned and jumped down from the wall, following his father up the slope of the volcano.

§

They were in the tunnel.

“Father?”

Gehn turned and, holding the lantern high, looked back down the tunnel at Atrus. “What is it, boy?”

Atrus lifted his own lamp and pointed at the D’ni symbol carved into the wall; the symbol he had seen that morning after the experiment. “This sign, father. What does it mean?”

Gehn motioned to him impatiently. “Come on now, Atrus. Catch up. We’ve wasted enough time as it is. There will be occasion for such things later.”

Atrus stared at the intricate symbol a moment longer, then, hiding his disappointment, turned away, hurrying to catch up with his father.

"We need to make up time," Gehn said, as Atrus came alongside. "The journey is a long one and I have several experiments in progress. I must be back in time to see how they have developed."

"Experiments?" Atrus asked, excited by the sound of it. "What kind of experiments?"

"Important ones," Gehn answered, as if that were sufficient to satisfy his son's curiosity. "Now hurry. There will be time to talk when we reach the first of the eder tomahn."

Atrus looked up at his father. "Eder tomahn?"

Gehn glanced at his son as he strode on. "The eder tomahn are way stations. Rest houses, you might term them. In the days of the late empire there were plans to have commerce with the world of men. Such plans, fortunately, did not come to pass, yet the paths were forged through the earth and rest houses prepared for those D'ni messengers who would venture out."

Atrus looked back at his father, astonished. "And this tunnel? Is this D'ni?"

Gehn shook his head. "No. This is simply a lava tube. Thousands of years ago, when the volcano was still active, hot lava ran through this channel, carving a passage to the surface."

Again Atrus felt a surge of disappointment. The walls of the tunnel had been so smooth, its shape so perfectly round, he had been sure it must have been the product of D'ni construction.

"Yes," Gehn continued, "but you will see things before our journey's done that will make you forget this tiny wormhole. Now, come over to the left, Atrus, and get behind me. The tunnel slopes steeply just ahead."

Atrus did as he was told, keeping close behind his father, careful not to slip, his left hand keeping his balance against the curved wall of the lava tube, his sandaled feet gripping the hard, dry floor. All went well until, by chance, he turned and looked back up the tunnel. Then, with a sudden rush of understanding, he realized where he was. The darkness behind him seemed suddenly oppressive. Who knew what waited back there beyond the lantern's glow?

He turned back, realizing just how dependent on his father he was. If he were to lose himself down here…

Ahead of him Gehn had stopped. “Slowly now,” he said, looking back at Atrus. “It ends just here. Now we go down The Well.”

Atrus blinked, seeing how the tunnel ended in a perfect circle up ahead. Beyond it was simple blackness. He went out and stood beside his father on the narrow, crescent-shaped ledge, overwhelmed by the sight that met his eyes.

In front of them lay a giant oval of blackness—a chasm so huge it seemed you could drop a whole volcano into it.

The Well.

Gehn raised his lamp, letting its light glint wetly off the far wall of the great shaft, revealing the massive striations of the rock, then pointed to his left.

“Just there. See, Atrus? See the steps?”

Atrus saw them, cut like the thread of a screw into the uneven sides of the great hole, but the thought of using them, of descending that vast shaft by their means, frightened him.

Gehn looked to him. “Would you like to go first, Atrus, or shall I?”

Atrus swallowed, then spoke, keeping the fear from his voice. “You’d better. You know the way.”

“Yes,” Gehn said, giving his son a knowing smile. “I do, don’t I?”

For the first hundred steps or so, the steps passed through a narrow tunnel cut into the edge of the chasm with only a thin gap low down by the floor to the right, but then, suddenly, the right-hand wall seemed to melt away and Atrus found himself out in the open, staring down into that massive well of darkness. Startled by the sight, he stumbled and his right sandal came away, toppled over the edge and into the darkness.

He stood there a moment, gasping, his back against the wall, trying to regain his nerve. But suddenly he found himself obsessed with he idea of falling into that darkness; and not just falling, but deliberately throwing himself. The urge was so strange and overpowering it made the hairs at the back of his neck stand on end.

Below him, almost directly opposite him across the great shaft, Gehn continued his descent, unaware, it seemed, of the immense danger, stepping lightly, almost effortlessly, down the spiral, his lamplight casting

flickering shadows on the groined and striated rock, before he vanished inside another of the narrow tunnels.

I must go on, Atrus told himself, freeing his left foot from the sandal; yet the fear he felt froze his muscles. It was like a dream, an evil dream. Even so, he forced himself to move, taking first one step and then another, each step an effort of sheer will.

If I fall I die. If I fall…

His father's voice echoed across that vast open space. "Atrus?"

He stopped, his shoulder pressed against the wall, and closed his eyes. "Y…yes, father?"

"Do you want me to come back to you? Would you like me o hold your hand, perhaps?"

He wanted to say yes, but something in Gehn's voice, the faintest tone of criticism, stopped him. He opened his eyes again and, steeling himself, answered. "No…I'll be all right."

"Good. But not so slow, eh? We cannot spend too much time here. Not if I am to be back in time."

Controlling his fear, Atrus began to descend once more.

Imagine you're inside a tree, he told himself. Imagine it.

And suddenly he could see it vividly, as if it were an illustration in one of his grandmother's books. He could picture it in the brilliant sunlight, its branches stretching from horizon to horizon, a tiny crescent moon snagged among its massive leaves. Why, even the blades of grass about its trunk were several times the height of a man!

Halfway down, there was a depression in the side of the shaft—a kind of cave. Whether it was natural or D'ni made, Atrus couldn't tell, but Gehn was waiting for him there, sitting on a carved stone ledge, calmly smoking his pipe.

"Are you all right, Atrus?" he asked casually.

"I'm fine now," Atrus answered genuinely. "There was a moment…"

He fell silent, seeing that his father wasn't listening. Gehn had taken out a tiny notebook with a tanned leather cover and was studying it as he smoked. Atrus glimpsed a diagram of paths and tunnels.

With a tiny grunt, Gehn closed the book and pocketed it again, then looked up at Atrus.

"You go ahead. I'll finish my pipe, then catch up with you."

§

It was several hours hard walking through a labyrinth of twisting tunnels before they finally came to the eder tomahn. The D'ni way station was built into a recess of a large cave, its black, perfectly finished marble in stark contrast to the cave's natural limestone. Atrus walked over to it and, holding up the lantern, ran his fingers across the satin-smooth surface, marveling at the lack of evident joints between the blocks, the way his own image was reflected back to him in the stone. It was as though the stone had been baked like melted tar, then set and polished like a mirror.

Real, Atrus thought, amazed by it.

Gehn meanwhile had walked across to face the door, which was deeply recessed into the stone. Reaching into the neck of his tunic, he drew out a magnificent golden chain which, until that moment, had been hidden from sight. On the end of it was a bevel-edged key, a thick, black thing streaked with red. Placing this to one of the matching shapes recessed into the door, Gehn pushed until it clicked. There was a moment's silence, then a strange clunk-clunk-clunk and the sound of a metal grating sliding back.

He removed the key and stepped back. As he did, the door slid into the stone, revealing a dimly lit interior.

Gehn stepped inside. Atrus, following, stopped just inside the room, surprised at how big it was. There were low, utility bunks to either side of the dormitory-sized room and a door at the end led through to what Atrus assumed was either a kitchen or a washroom of some kind. He looked to his father.

"Why are we stopping?"

To his surprise, Gehn yawned. "Because the hour is late," he answered. "And because I am tired."

"But I thought…"

Gehn raised his hand, as if to stop any further argument. Then, turning, he gestured toward a large knapsack that rested on the bunk in the right-hand corner.

"That is yours," Gehn said unceremoniously. "You can change now or later, it is entirely up to you."

Atrus went across and, unfastening the leather buckle, looked inside. Frowning, he tipped the bag up, spilling its contents onto the mattress.

Standing back, he gave a little laugh, surprised, then turned, looking to Gehn, who was sitting on the edge of one of the facing bunks, pulling off his boots.

“Thank you,” he said. “I’ll change later, if that’s all right.”

Gehn grunted. “Do as you will, lad. But I would not sleep in the boots if I were you. I don’t know if hey fit. I had to guess at the size.”

Atrus turned back, gently brushing one of the boots with his fingertips, hen lifted it, cradling it, sniffing in its rich, deep smell. It was strangely beautiful. Studying it, he could see that it had never been worn before.

Beside the knee-length boots, there was a cloak—a small version of his father’s, a black shirt with a strange book symbol on it, a skull-shaped hat made of some kind of metal that seemed soft unless you really pressed it hard, and a small leather-and-metal pouch.

Atrus squatted on the edge of the bed to examine this last, untying the drawstring and peering inside. For a moment he didn’t understand, then with a gasp of delight, he poured a number of the tiny objects out into his palm.

Fire-marbles! It was a whole pouch of fire-marbles! Why, there must have been fifty, sixty of them!

He looked to his father, meaning to thank him again, but Gehn was sprawled out on his back, fast asleep.

Going across, Atrus stood there a moment, staring down at his father. In sleep he could see the similarities to Anna, in the shape of Gehn’s chin and mouth particularly. Both had striking, noble faces. Both had that same mixture of strength and delicacy in their features. Yes, now that he had the chance to really look, he could see that it was only the pallor of Gehn’s skin, the ash whiteness of his hair that made him seem so different. That and the dignified austerity of his manner.

Noticing that Gehn had removed only one of his boots, Atrus gently eased the other boot off and set the two side by side at the head of the bunk. Then, taking the cover from the adjacent bunk, he spread it out over his father.

He was about to move away, when something drew his attention. Reaching down, he picked up the pipe from where it had fallen. For a moment he held it up, studying the engravings that covered the silver bands about the stock, astonished by the detail of the work. Curious, he placed the spout beneath his nose and sniffed. It had a strange, sweet scent; the same as that he had noticed on his father's breath.

With a sigh, Atrus placed the pipe beside the boots, then went back across, sitting there a while, his fingers idly sorting the fire-marbles, noting the variations of color and size. Then, putting them away, he set the pouch down on the floor beside the bunk and stretched out, his hands behind his head. He was asleep in an instant.

§

He woke to find Gehn shaking him.

"Come on, lad. We have a long journey ahead of us today. Get changed and we shall be off."

Atrus sat up slowly, wondering where he was, surprised not to find himself on the ledge in his own room, his mattress beneath him, the smell of his grandmother's cooking in the air.

Knuckling his eyes, he put his feet round onto the floor, struck at once by how cold it was, how damp the air.

Feeling sluggish and despondent Atrus stood, beginning to dress, the texture and smell of the new clothes—their smooth softness after the roughness of his own garments—making him feel strange. Pulling on the boots, he felt extremely odd, transformed almost, as if the change went deeper than the surface of appearance.

Atrus looked about him, as if at any moment he might wake, but he could not delude himself: he *was* awake, and he was traveling with his father, down into the depths of the earth.

That thought now thrilled him. He looked to Gehn. "Will we reach D'ni today, father?"

"No. Not today."

Disappointed, Atrus turned back, beginning to pack away his surface clothes, but Gehn, seeing what he was doing, came across and pulled them from the pack, throwing them to the floor. "You will not need

those rags now, Atrus. You are D'ni now. You shall wear only D'ni clothes henceforth."

Atrus stared at the discarded clothes, reluctant to part with them. They were a link to the past, to Anna and the cleft. To leave them here seemed…*impossible*.

"Well, boy? What are you waiting for?"

Atrus looked up, stung by the sharpness in his father's voice, then, remembering his promise to Anna, bowed his head obediently. Slipping his own bag into the knapsack, he packed the pouch of fire-marbles and the strange protective hat.

"Good," Gehn said, nodding decisively as he heaved his knapsack up onto his shoulders. "We shall eat as we go along."

Atrus blinked, wondering just what his father had in mind, but it was clear Gehn was in no mood for explanations. Buckling his own knapsack, Atrus threw it over his shoulder, then followed his father out.

§

They went down through an ant's nest of damp, narrow tunnels that, from time to time, would open out into small caverns before running on into the rock.

At the bottom of a particularly steep and narrow tunnel, they emerged into the largest cavern they had yet encountered. The ceiling was forty, maybe fifty feet above them, while the light from their lanterns revealed only the nearer end of the tunnel, the far end being obscured in darkness. Ahead and to their left a long pool hugged the rock, while to the right the way was made difficult by a jumbled slope of small boulders.

Stopping, Gehn removed his pack and took out what looked to Atrus like some sort of pot or caddy. Setting it down, he then took out his hat and, turning to Atrus, gestured that he should do the same.

"The way gets difficult from here," he said. "You'll be grateful for those boots before long."

But Atrus wasn't so sure. The boots might look beautiful and smell wonderful, but already both of his heels and the outside of the big toe on his right foot were beginning to rub uncomfortably.

Taking his knapsack off, he found the D'ni helmet and strapped it on, then looked to his father. Gehn shrugged on his pack, then, reaching

down, picked up the “pot.”

“Come on,” he said, turning to smile Atrus. “I think you might like this next part.”

Atrus nodded, then reached down to retrive his pack. As he did, the whole of the cave in front of him lit up as if a breach had suddenly been made in the roof and the sunlight had rushed in. He looked up, startled, seeing at once that the brilliant light emanated from the “pot,” a broad and powerful beam spreading to fill the far end of the cavern, revealing a sight so amazing that Atrus blinked and rubbed the backs of his hands over his eyes.

It was like a waterfall of crystal, cascading from the ceiling to the floor, its melted, flowing forms unlike anything Atrus had ever seen.

“What is it?” Atrus asked, a note of pure awe in his voice as he followed his father up onto that great pile of rocks, his eyes drawn constantly to the glistening, crystalline curtain.

“It’s called dripstone,” Gehn answered matter-of-factly, moving the beam of the torch across the frozen face of it. “It’s formed by mineral deposits in the water leaking through the roof of the cavern, building up over thousands upon thousands of years. Such deposits take many forms—flowstone and dripstone, stalactites and stalagmites, shelfstone and helictites. Some are as delicate as lace, others as brutal as the rock itself.” Gehn laughed. “Never fear, Atrus. You will see many such wonders in the next few hours.”

As they came close, Atrus stopped, staring openmouthed at the sight. He would never have guessed, never in a thousand years—but Gehn was already moving on, down the slope toward the entrance to another tunnel. Taking one last look, Atrus turned, then clambered down the rock, hurrying to catch up.

§

Gehn had not been wrong. In the hours that followed Atrus saw a dozen such splendors—caves filled with long, delicate columns no thicker than his arm, jutting like an inverted crystal forest from the ceiling, or huge but delicately ridged candles, endless fringes of tiny, frozen fingers dripping from them, melting into the fluid rock. At the same time, however, his boots began to chafe him badly. Discomfort became soreness,

which in turn became pain, such that, after a while, Atrus could not take a single step without wincing.

When, finally, they stopped, in a long, low cave that was edged with shallow pools, the first thing he did was to remove one of his boots.

Gehn came across and knelt beside him. “Show me.”

Gingerly, he let Gehn take his foot by the ankle and study it. The skin had rubbed away in three separate places. Blood streaked his heel and between his toes.

Gehn looked up at him soberly, as if to judge his reaction. “I have some ointment in my pack. It ought to alleviate your discomfort.”

Atrus quickly applied the cream and bandaged his feet, then pulled on his boots again.

“Good,” Gehn said, pleased with him. “Then let us proceed. The path begins just ahead of us.”

Atrus stood slowly, flexing his toes within the bandages. “The path?”

“Into D’ni,” Gehn said, slipping his pack back on.

The words raised Atrus’s spirits, making him momentarily forget his injuries.

D’ni! he thought, his mind filled with a dozen colorful images from the tales his grandmother had told him over the years. *D’ni!*

§

Atrus stared up at the elaborately decorated stone and metal arch that framed the entrance to the tunnel, then turned, looking to his father.

“Are we there?”

“No,” Gehn answered, “but this is where the path begins.”

Immediately beneath the great arch, the tunnel floor was smoothly paved, the floor covered in an intricate, abstract swirl of variously colored stones and metals that seemed to merge and melt and never repeat itself. The path ran arrow-straight into the tunnel, neither rising nor falling, in a manner that suggested it had been cut by the D’ni, not bored by natural forces.

Following Gehn, Atrus stepped beneath the arch, their booted feet clicking on the marbled floor, the sound echoed back and forth along the

tunnel. He was limping now, trying not to put too much weight on his right foot, but he was determined not to complain.

When will we be there? he wanted to ask, bursting with the excitement he felt at the thought of finally seeing D'ni, but he could see how Gehn was lost in his thoughts and was loath to disturb him.

Partway down the tunnel the air seemed to change, to grow warmer, stuffier, and suddenly there was an old, familiar smell in his nostrils. Sulfur! It was the sharp, eye stinging tang of sulfur.

Gehn turned and gestured to him. "You had best put your lenses on, lad."

Atrus did as he was told; then, feeling in his tunic pocket, he pulled out the one item of his clothing he had managed to save, the mask Anna had made for him, and tied it about his nose and mouth. Then, wincing, he hobbled after his father.

Slowly the tunnel grew brighter, warmer, the air stuffier. The tunnel ended abruptly in a sheer drop. Ahead the D'ni path ran on, smoothly, uninterrupted it seemed, on giant pillars of stone. Below it, no more than eighty feet beneath where Atrus stood, was a bubbling lake of lava, black at the edges, a fiery golden yellow at the center.

The heat was intense, the fumes almost suffocating. Gehn, he noted, now wore a mask about his mouth and nose, and for a moment he wondered what his father had meant to do, whether he'd meant him to venture out across that lake without any form of protection.

The thought disturbed him.

Gehn turned, beckoning him on. "Walk quickly," he said, "and don't pause for a moment. Things are much cooler on the other side."

Atrus hesitated, then followed his father out onto the bridge, the heat from the path immediately evident, even through the thick soles of his boots. Ten paces on and he was half-running, trying to keep his feet off the stingingly hot paving.

Ahead, he now realized, the bridge, which he'd thought continuous, was breached. A single span had collapsed, leaving a jagged gap, over which a narrow beam of D'ni stone had been laid.

He watched his father cross this narrow causeway effortlessly, without breaking stride, yet when he came to it Atrus found himself unable to go on.

Just below him the red hot surface seemed to slowly undulate, like some living thing, a great bubble of superheated air emerging every now and then to break the surface with a giant “glop,” the air filled suddenly with steam and he stinging scent of sulfur.

Atrus was coughing now. His feet seemed to be burning and his chest felt fit to burst. If he did not cross the beam soon he would collapse.

“Come on!” Gehn urged him from the other side. “Don’t stop, boy! Get going again. You’re almost there!”

His head was swimming now and he felt that any moment he would fall. And if he fell…

He took three paces out onto the beam, feeling its intense heat through the thick leather of his boots.

“Come on!” his father urged, but he could not move. It was as if he, too, had been turned to stone.

“Come on!”

The beam lurched under him and for a moment he thought he was going to fall, but some instinct took hold of him. As the narrow beam tilted, he jumped, his feet thudding against the stone on the other side.

His vision blurred. He couldn’t breathe. Staggering, he took a step backward…

6

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Atrus woke in a cool, brightly-lit cavern, the air of which was fresh and sweet after the air in the lava cavern. There was a blanket over him and from close by he could hear the echoing drip drip drip of water. Shivering, he sat up, wondering where he was, and immediately saw his father, less than thirty feet away, standing beside a pool, the surface of which seemed to glow as if illuminated from below.

His feet and legs ached and his head still felt strangely heavy, but otherwise he felt all right. Piecing things together, he began to understand. He had almost fallen from the bridge. His father must have rescued him.

Thinking of it, he looked down, smiling. It was the kind of thing Anna would have done. The same thing he himself would have done had their positions been reversed.
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Atrus looked across again, trying to get the measure of this man—this stranger—who had come into his life so suddenly and changed it. He was strange, there was no doubting it, and his manner was abrupt almost to the point of rudeness, but maybe there was a reason for that. Maybe he was simply not used to dealing with people: as unused to the idea if a "son" as he, Atrus, was unused to the idea of a "father." If so, he should make allowances. Until they knew each other better. Until that tie of blood was also one of friendship.

This line of reasoning cheered him. Throwing off the blanket he got up and hobbled over to where his father stood, standing beside him silently, looking out across the strangely lit pool.

"What does that?" he asked, pointing to the water's surface.

Gehn turned. He had clearly been preoccupied with some matter. "Ah, Atrus…you're up."

"I…I guess I have to thank you."

Gehn shrugged, then looked back across the pond. "It's good to talk again," he said, pushing out his chin in a strange gesture. "It's been very isolated down here on my own. I've longed for a companion for a long time now. An intellectual companion, that is. When I knew you were alive…well," he turned. "To be honest with you, Atrus, I was surprised. I did not expect you to survive. But I was pleased. I thought we might get on. Eventually."

Atrus smiled shyly. "I hope so. I want to learn."

"Good. That is a healthy attitude to have." Then, "Are you up to traveling on? I have been pushing you, I realize, but there is good reason."

"I'll be ok," Atrus said, feeling a sudden warmth toward his father. "It's just so…strange."

Gehn stared at him thoughtfully. "Yes. I suppose it must be, after the cleft. But the best of it lies ahead, Atrus. And I mean the best. D'ni. Tonight we shall reach D'ni."

Atrus's face lit. "Tonight?" Then an expression of confusion crossed his features. "But what time is it now? Morning, afternoon? I can't follow it any longer. Down here time seems to have no meaning."

Gehn took out his D'ni timer and handed it to Atrus.

"See there" he said, indicating the five differently shaded sectors—three light, two dark—that were marked on the circular face. A thin trail of silver spiraled from the center of the circle, stopping just inside the

second of the lightly shaded sectors. “Right now it is the D’ni midday. We D’ni measure time differently from those who dwell on the surface. They set their clocks to the passage of the sun. We’ however, set our clocks to the biological rhythms of our environment. Each of those sectors represents just over six hours in surface time.”

“So the D’ni day is longer?”

“Very good, Atrus. You learn quickly.”

Gehn took the timer back and, shaking it, held it to his ear, almost as if to check it was still working. Then, satisfied, he slipped it back into his pocket and looked to Atrus.

“If you’re ready?”

§

Despite Atrus’s expectations, the way grew harder. Fallen rock blocked the way in several places and they had to climb over piles of jagged stone or squeeze through narrow gaps. The tunnels, too, seemed to grow smaller and darker, and though he could not be sure of it, Atrus sensed that they had long strayed from the straight path that led direct to D’ni. Certainly there was no sign of that wonderful stone-and-metal path beneath their feet. Despite everything, however, his spirits were high, his whole being filled with an excited anticipation that coursed like a drug in his veins.

D’ni! He would soon be in D’ni! Why, even the dull pain in his feet seemed insignificant beside that fact.

They had traveled only an hour or so when Gehn called back to him and told him to get over to the right. Just ahead, part of the tunnel floor had fallen away to form a kind of pit. As he edged around it he could see, far below, a valley, with what looked like a broad, dark river flowing through it. He strained his ears, thinking he could faintly hear the sound of it—a roaring, rushing noise—but could not be sure.

Farther on, that noise, which he had begun to think was merely in his head, began to grow, until, coming out of the tunnel into a massive opening, the far walls of which could not be glimpsed in the darkness, that same sound filled the air, seeming to shake the walls on every side. The air was damp and cold, tiny particles of glittering mist dancing in the light from their lanterns.

Atrus backed against the wall. Then, as Gehn switched on the big lamp, he saw what it was.

Water fell in a solid sheet from a ledge two hundred feet above them, plunging a thousand feet into a massive pool below. In the torch's beam the water was like solid crystal.

Atrus turned, in time to glimpse Gehn returning the notebook to his inner pocket. He gestured past Atrus, indicating the way with his torch, the beam illuminating a broad ledge that circled the massive cavern.

Coming into the smaller cavern at the back of the falls, Gehn stopped and called him over, holding his lantern out over a shelf of rock that was filled with crystal-clear water.

Atrus leaned close to look, then gave a little gasp of surprise. In the water were a number of long, colorless fish that looked like worms. They had frilled transparent gills and fins. As he looked, they scurried across and, slipping through a tiny rent in the lip of the rock, seemed to jump into the pool below with a plip-plop-plip that echoed throughout that tiny space.

"What are they?" Atrus asked, looking up into his father's eyes.

"Salamanders," Gehn answered. "They live down here, along with crickets, spiders, millipedes, and fish. They're troglodytic, Atrus. They never leave these caves. And they're blind, too. Did you notice that?"

Gehn turned away and walked on, his boots crunching across the littered floor of the cavern.

For a long time they had been descending; now they began to climb, the way getting easier, until the tunnel they were following suddenly swung round to the right and met a second, larger tunnel.

Stepping out into it, Atrus gave a little gasp of surprise. It was the D'ni path! Both ahead and behind it stretched away, straight and perfectly cylindrical, into the darkness of the rock.

Staring back at the way they'd come, he understood what they must have done. For some reason—a cave-in, possibly—the straight path had been blocked, and they had taken an alternate route.

For a moment he recollected his father studying the diagram in his notebook and the faint anxiety that had been in his eyes, and wondered how he had come upon those paths; whether it had been a question of stumbling aimlessly in the darkness, constantly tracing and retracing his path until he'd found a way through.

“Atrus?”

He turned. Gehn was already fifty feet up the tunnel.

“I’m coming?” he called, hobbling to catch up. But in his mind he was imagining his father, all those years ago, when he had first returned to D’ni, struggling in the darkness here beneath the earth—alone, completely and utterly alone—and felt a deep admiration of the courage that had driven him.

§

“Are we close?”

“Not far,” Gehn answered. “The Gate is just ahead.”

The news thrilled Atrus. Not far! There had been times when he’d thought they would walk forever and never arrive; but now they were almost there. The land he’d dreamed about all his life lay just ahead. A land of wonder and mystery.

Atrus hurried on, catching up with his father, keeping abreast with him as they neared the tunnel’s end. He could see it now, directly ahead, and beyond it, on the far side of a massive marble plaza…

“Is *that* the Gate?” he asked, awed, his voice a whisper.

“That’s it,” Gehn said, grinning proudly. “It marks the southern boundary of the D’ni kingdom. Beyond it, everything for a hundred miles belongs to the D’ni.”

Atrus looked to his father, surprised that he talked of the D’ni as if they still existed, then he looked back, taking in the sheer size of the great stone gate that was revealed beyond the tunnel’s exit.

As they came out, he looked up and up and up, his mouth open in wonder. Though the surface was cracked in places and fragments had fallen away, littering the great expanse of marbled floor that lay before him, it was still magnificent. Filling the whole of one end of what was clearly a vast cavern, the huge stone barrier plugged that space from wall to wall, its surface filled with what seemed like an infinity of intertwining shapes—of men, machines, and beasts; of flowers and shields and faces; and D’ni words, some of which he recognized—all of it cut from a jet black granite that seemed to sparkle in the light from Gehn’s lantern.

The Gate dwarfed them, like nothing they had so far seen. As he walked toward it Atrus felt the hairs on his neck rise. Whatever he had

pictured in his head, whatever he'd imagined while listening to Anna's tales, the reality exceeded it by far.

Stepping beneath that arch, he looked up; its massive thickness impressing him. How had the D'ni fashioned such a vast artifact? How had they cut the blocks, how fashioned them? From his own limited experience, he knew the difficulties of working stone, but the D'ni had thought nothing of throwing up such a huge mass of it.

Ahead of him the marble floor ended abruptly. Beyond it a cavern stretched away, its walls pocked with tunnel entrances. Hundreds of them. Thousands, maybe.

It was suddenly very warm, the air much closer than it had been. Gehn glanced at his notebook again, then began to make his way across the floor of the cavern.

Selecting one of the larger tunnels, he gestured to Atrus to catch up with him, then turned and disappeared inside. The tunnel was much larger than any they had been in, with countless tunnels and small caverns—clearly artificially excavated—branching off.

Atrus followed his father, his eyes constantly surveying what lay to either side, noticing new things every second: great wheels and gantries; factories and warehouses; great mounds of loose rock and equally huge pits over which massive abandoned cranes stood like sentinels—all these and many other things, most of which he could not recognize at first sight.

Great machines stood idle everywhere he looked, as though abandoned only hours before, their oil-like, lacquered surface gleaming darkly in their passing light. Huge mining rigs rested on great pneumatic platforms beside the gaping holes of shafts bored into the foot of the cavern's walls, like massive insects feeding, their squat dark shapes still and silent.

Steam rose unchanneled from great fissures on every side: steam that had once powered the industrial might of D'ni. Elsewhere simple stone houses stood empty, roofless in the D'ni style, the thin cloth screens that had once maintained their privacy shredded by the same force that had toppled the stone towers of the factories.

Seeing it all, Atrus wondered just how it could have come to an end. It was so vast, so extraordinary.

From time to time other paths crossed their own, making him realize that there was not one D'ni path but an endless labyrinth of them,

threading their way through the dark earth.

Suddenly, without warning, Gehn began to climb the wall of the tunnel, ducking into a much smaller shaft. Atrus, catching up, looked across to his right and saw that the tunnel was blocked some twenty yards ahead, collapsed in upon itself. Fearful of losing Gehn, he climbed the tunnel wall, following him inside.

§

They had been walking for hours and all the way their path had got slowly narrower, hotter, stuffier. Gehn now walked with the notebook open in one hand, consulting it almost constantly. The path had taken so many twists and turns that Atrus felt numbed by it, but still Gehn went on, confident, it seemed, that it led somewhere.

Then, suddenly, the quality of the light changed. Atrus blinked, his senses sparked to life by that sudden change. There was a faint breeze, a slight cooling of the air. As they turned the next corner there was a marked increase in the intensity of the light, a definite orange glow up ahead. The air was cool and clear, heavy suddenly with the scent of vegetation. The path climbed.

Ahead there was an opening. A circle of brilliant orange light.

As Atrus stepped out, it was to be met by the most astonishing sight he had yet encountered.

Facing him was an enormous valley, six miles across and ten broad, its steeply sloping shores descending to a glowing orange lake that filled at least half the valley’s floor. At the center of that lake was a huge island, a mile or more in width, two twisted columns of rock pushing up from that great tumulus to soar more than a mile into the air. Beyond that, to its right, the great rock walls were curiously striped, regular tiered levels of colored stone reaching up into the shadows overhead, above the level at which Atrus himself stood. Within those levels great pools of orange water glowed.

He loked up, expecting clouds, or maybe stars, but the blackness was immaculate overhead. Slipping his glasses down, he increased their magnification, studying the far side of the lake. Buildings! They were buildings! Buildings that clung to the great rock precipice, seeming to defy gravity!

Atrus craned his neck, following the course of the rock walls upward, understanding coming to him in an instant. He was inside! Inside a vast, cavernous expanse.

He stared, awed by the strange beauty of the sight. Beneath him the ground sloped steeply down to the sea's edge where, in a tiny harbor, a boat was moored. To the right, just offshore, the sea was dotted with tiny islands, like dark blemishes in that orange mirror.

"There," Gehn said, coming alongside. "Now, perhaps, you might understand why I could not leave you in that ridiculous crack in the ground. Is that not the grandest sight you have ever seen, Atrus?"

It was, and he did indeed understand why his father had brought him, yet the reminder cast a shadow over what he was feeling at that moment. Suddenly he wanted Anna to be there with him, wanted to share it with her—to be able to talk to her and ask her questions.

"Come," Gehn said from just below him as he began to make his way down the steep slope. "Another hour and we're home."

§

Atrus stood on the foredeck, his right hand gripping the rail as Gehn maneuvered the strange craft out onto the mirror-smooth waters, digging the pole deep, his muscles straining.

Atrus looked about him excitedly, conscious of the absence of echoes in that vast space, of the sound Gehn's pole made as it dipped into the water. The cavern was so vast, it felt almost as if they were back outside, on the surface, sailing on a moonless night, but for that orange glow that underlit everything.

As the blunt, wedge-shaped prow of the boat came around, Atrus saw the city in the distance once again. From here it seemed immaculate and beautiful, a vast bowl of towers and spires, as if it alone had not been touched by the destruction he had seen elsewhere. But they were not going to the city. Not yet, anyway. "Home," it seemed, was on one of the cluster of islands that skirted the right-hand wall of the cavern.

Atrus let out a little sigh. Now that he had stopped walking, his muscles had finally begun to seize up. His body ached and his eyelids felt like lead weights. The gentle movement of the boat didn't help either. It lulled him, like a voice singing in his head. He blinked, trying to keep his

eyes open, trying to stay awake a while longer, but it was hard. It felt like he had walked a thousand miles.

For a moment Atrus dozed where he stood, then he jerked awake again, looking up, expecting to see stars littering the desert sky.

"Where…?"

He turned, looking back to where his father sat in the center of the boat, slowly rowing them toward the island, and shook his head to clear it, convinced he was in the grip of some strangely vivid dream.

Facing front again, he saw the island looming from the shadows up ahead, its twisted, conical outline silhouetted black against the surrounding sea. Briefly, he noticed how the water about the far end of the island was dark and wondered why.

Home, he thought, noting the fallen walls, the toppled tower of the great mansion that sat upon the summit of the island like a huge slab of volcanic rock. *Home…*

Yet even as he saw it, sleep overcame him. Unable to prevent himself, he fell to his knees, then slumped onto the deck, unconscious, so that he did not see the boat pass beneath he island, into a brightly lit cavern. Nor did he see the waiting figure standing on the flight of winding steps that led up into the rock above.

§

"Atrus? Are you awake?"

Atrus lay there, his eyes closed, remembering the dream.

The voice came closer. "Atrus?"

He turned onto his back and stretched. The room was warm, the mattress strangely soft beneath him.

"What is it?" he asked lazily, uncertain yet whether he was awake.

"It is evening now," the voice, his father's voice, said. "You have slept a whole day, Atrus. Supper is ready, if you want some."

Atrus opened his eyes, focusing. Gehn stood there two paces from the bed, a lantern in one hand. In its flickering light the room seemed vast and shadowy.

"Where are we?" he asked, the details of the dream receding as he began to recall the long trek through the caverns.

“We are on K’veer,” Gehn said, stepping closer, his pale, handsome face looming from the shadow. “This will be your room, Atrus. There are clothes in the wardrobes over there if you want to change, but there is no real need. When you are ready, you should turn left outside the door and head toward the light.”

Atrus nodded, then, with a shock, realized that his feet no longer hurt. Nor were they bandaged. “My feet…”

Gehn looked down at him. “I treated them while you were asleep. They will be sore for several days, but you can rest now.”

“And your experiments? Were we in time?”

Gehn turned away, as if he hadn’t heard, then walked across the room, drawing back the heavy curtains to reveal, through a massive, latticed window, the orange glow of the cavern beyond. There was a broad stone balcony and a view of the distant city.

“I shall leave you now,” Gehn said, setting the lantern down on the table beside the bed. “But try not to be too long, Atrus. There are things we need to talk about.”

Atrus waited for his father to leave the room, then sat up, sliding his legs around and examining his feet in the lamp’s light. Where the sores were worst, on his heels and ankles and on the balls of his feet, Gehn had smeared them with an ointment that left a dark stain on the skin. Atrus touched one of the patches gingerly, then sniffed his fingers. It was the same as the ointment his grandmother had always used whenever he’d grazed knees or shins or elbows on the rock.

Atrus?

Yes, Grandmother?”

What do you see, Atrus?

I see the D’ni city, Grandmother. I see…

Atrus stepped out onto the balcony, looking at it, trying to fix it in his memory so that he could tell her when he saw her again.

Far out there was a moving shadow on the water. He narrowed his eyes, watching it a while, then shrugged and looked beyond it at the city once again. *Yes*, he thought. *I see the most incredible sight I’ve ever seen.*

§

“Ah, Atrus…come and sit with me.”

Atrus hesitated in the doorway, then stepped inside, into the clear blue light of the kitchen. His father sat at a table to his left, a plate of food set before him.

It was a big V-shaped room with two large windows overlooking a stone-paved terrace garden that jutted out over the orange sea. The light outside seemed much darker now, and to compensate, Gehn had placed several lanterns in niches about the room.

Looking about him, Atrus noticed that the kitchen was solid stone. The cupboards, the table, the benches, even the sink and oven, were made of a strange, smooth banded gneiss that, like the path they had followed into D'ni, seemed to have been softened and then molded like clay. Tiny strips of metal, intricately fashioned, were threaded into the black-and-white-striped stone in a manner Atrus found hard to fathom. Though it was stone, it had a light warm feel that was unexpected. How they had managed it was a mystery to him, yet it was clear that the D'ni had developed processes well advanced of the ways of men.

"How do you feel now?" Gehn asked, gesturing for him to take a seat across from him.

"How *did* he feel? Homesick, but also, now that his waking mood had passed, immensely curious. What did his father want of him? Gehn had said something to Anna about teaching him. But teaching him what?

"Hungry," he answered finally, finding it safest.

"Good," Gehn said. Turning, he picked up a small handbell from the table beside him and rang it.

At once a figure filled the far doorway, looming briefly in the shadows before it entered the room.

"Atrus, this is Rijus, my serving man."

The man who stood there, holding a large, shallow basket piled high with fruit, was tall, taller even than Gehn, and had a great domed head that seemed to be made of polished ivory. He wore a baggy dark blue one-piece, tied at the waist with a length of similarly colored cord, but the most remarkable thing about him were his eyes; lidless eyes that were like blemished eggs in his otherwise undistinguished face.

Atrus looked to his father, uncertain how to behave, hen, when Gehn gave him no clue, he turned back and, bowing his head slightly, said, "I'm pleased to meet you, Rijus."

“It is no use trying to engage Rijus in conversation, Atrus. Rijus is a mute. He was born that way and he will die that way. But he understands commands well enough. If you need something, you should simply ask Rijus.”

Atrus hesitated, then gave a little nod.

“Well, boy? What are you waiting for? Are you hungry or not?”

Atrus stood and, conscious of the servant’s unnaturally staring eyes upon him, went over to him. A dozen different kinds of fruit were spread out in the basket—only a few of which he recognized, and then only from the traders’ packs. Tiny beads of moisture speckled their brightly colored surfaces, enhancing their strange but perfect forms.

He looked back at Gehn. “Did you grow these, father?”

“In a manner of speaking.”

Atrus turned back, wondering what to choose, almost afraid to touch them, they seemed so perfect. Then, reaching out, he picked one of the long, yellow, oval-shaped fruit, attracted by its strange, five-ribbed form.

It was rotten. It fell apart as he lifted it, revealing its dark brown innards. He looked to his father, surprised.

Gehn gestured to Rijus impatiently. “Take them away.” Then, turning to Atrus, he fixed him with his stare.

“Come, Atrus. I think it is time we began our task. Time you found out why I brought you here to D’ni.”

§

A twist of steps led up to a broad, high-ceilinged corridor, the end of which opened out onto a balcony directly above the terrace. On the far side of the balcony, set into the rock face, was a massive metal door, the jet black face of which was decorated with the same elaborate patterns Atrus had glimpsed on the Inner Gate. Pausing before it, Gehn reached inside his cloak and took out a large key, fitting it into the lock and turning it twice before removing it.

He stepped back. There was a faint shudder and then the door began to rise, sliding into the rock smoothly and silently, to reveal a dark, wedge-shaped opening. Six steps led down into a spacious room, lit from above by a massive star-shaped lamp. At the very center of the room was a

raised dais, surrounded by three steplike ledges. On top of that dais were five large granite pedestals. Atrus turned, looking about him, impressed by what he saw. The walls were covered with massive shelves made of thick slabs of stone, and on those shelves were hundreds, possibly thousands of leather-bound books, similar to those his grandmother had kept back on her shelf in the cleft.

Gehn turned, looking to his son. “This, as you see, is the library. This is where you will come for your lessons every day.” He gestured toward a low stone table in one corner. “That will be your desk. Bu before we commence, I want to show you why I brought you here, and why it is so important that you learn the ways of D’ni.”

Raising his right hand, he beckoned Atrus to him, then, as the young man came alongside him, took his elbow and lead him up the steps and onto the dais.

At the center of the dais, recessed into its bone-white marble floor, was a circular pool surrounded by five marble pedestals.

Gehn stood before him. “Choose a book. Any book on the shelves.”

“What?”

“Choose a book.”

Atrus went across to the shelves, letting his eyes travel across their richly bound spines. There was no writing on any of them. A few had symbols, but none made any sense.

He turned, looking to his father.

“*Choose* a book.”

Atrus took one down, the smell of its light green cover strangely intoxicating, exciting.

Gehn reached out, taking it from him. Opening it, he scanned it quickly, then nodded. Turning the book about, Gehn placed it reverently on the pedestal, watching Atrus all the while.

Atrus stepped closer, looking down at the open pages. The left-hand page was blank, but on the right…

He gasped, amazed by the clarity of the picture in that small, rectangular box. Why, it was like staring through a window!

A strange, rust red conical mound filled the foreground, reminding Atrus of a giant termite’s nest. Behind it was a lush backdrop of vivid, almost emerald green, with a glimpse of a cloudless sky above.

As Atrus watched, the image on the page slowly changed, seeming to tilt to the right, like an eye attempting to follow something just out of vision. The mound slowly disappeared, to be replaced in the foreground by a fast-flowing stream that tumbled between the rocks, then fell spectacularly into a crystal pool. But no sooner had it focused on that, than it lifted again, swinging out and over the surrounding gully, to reveal, beyond it, a valley filled with low, almost bushlike trees, on which could be seen a host of vividly colored fruit. There was a glimpse of a long, clear pool surrounded by grassy slopes and of distant, snowcapped mountains, and then the image returned to the rust red mound.

Gehn stepped across. “Give me your hand. You’ll live as the D’ni now. This is what you were born for.”

§

Atrus felt the skin on his palm tingle as though a faint electrical current had passed through it. His hand seemed drawn to the image on the page, *attracted* to it. For a moment that was all. Then, with a sudden, sickening lurch, he felt himself sucked into the page. Or rather, it was as if the page grew suddenly huge, enveloping him in the weave of its fibers. At that same instant he felt a curious shifting sensation. It felt as though he were melting, the fragile shell of him imploding, collapsing back in upon himself, and then the blackness seeped through.

And as he finally surrendered to that blackness, so he found himself back in his body, standing on the grass just in front of the mound, a fresh breeze blowing into his face, the stream below him, the waterfall and the valley just beyond.

Gone were the marble pedestals, the book-lined walls, the solid rock ceiling overhead! Atrus reached out, as if to touch them, but there was nothing.

Atrus looked up, startled by the transition. Huge white clouds drifted in a sky so blue it looked like a child’s painting. The air hummed with tiny insects, while all around him the heady scents of fruits and flowers swamped his senses.

He fell to his knees, astonished. This was magic, surely! Behind him Gehn shimmered into being.

“Get up onto your feet, boy,” Gehn said, quietly but firmly.

Atrus struggled to his feet, then turned to face his father. He was unable to believe what had just happened to him

"Where…where *are* we?"

Gehn stepped past him, standing beside the stream, his booted feet on the edge of a steep incline, looking down at the waterfall.

As Atrus came alongside, Gehn looked to his son, his chest swelling with pride. "Once the D'ni ruled a million worlds, using what was grown in them to clothe and feed and provision themselves. So it was in the time of their greatness." He shook his head. "But all that is passed. Now there's only you and I, Atrus. We two, and the worlds we shall make."

"*Make*, father?"

Gehn looked out across the land that lay beneath them and nodded, a fierce pride in his face as he spoke. "Yes, Atrus. I made this world. I made the rock on which we stand, and the very air we are breathing. I made the grass and the trees, the insects and the birds. I fashioned the flowers and the earth in which they grow. I made the mountains and the streams. All that you see, I made."

Turning to face Atrus, Gehn placed his hands on his son's shoulders, his eyes burning with excitement now.

"I plan to make you my apprentice, Atrus, and teach you about the books. Would you like that?"

Looking up at his father, Atrus remembered suddenly how Gehn had stepped from that great veil of whiteness at the volcano's edge, awed by the power in the figure that stood facing him.

"Yes, father," he answered clearly, "I'd like that very much."

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"That phrase…now where did I see that phrase?" Gehn placed the quill pen back in the marble ink pot, then, sitting forward, reached across his desk, taking the second of the big, leather-bound books from the stack. Edging aside the book he had been writing in, he drew the ancient volume toward him, then opened it and quickly flicked through until he came to the passage he had marked with a thin blue strip of paper.

"Ah…that's it. That should do it."
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He looked up, his eyes focused inward briefly, as he considered what else he might need. It was barely midday, but here in Gehn's study it was permanently night, the shadows of that cavernous room kept at bay by a small stone lamp perched on the corner of his massive wooden desk.

Gehn read the line again, tracing it with his index finger, then squinted at the page.

"Perhaps a little over-elaborate…remove those two descriptive words…embellishment, that's all they are."

He nodded, pleased with himself, then, moving the book he had been working on until it rested beside the ancient text, he began to copy out the D'ni phrase, taking care to leave out the two words he considered served no purpose.

"There," he said softly, looking up again, aware of his surroundings for the first time in over three hours.

Every surface in that huge, cavelike room was filled with books. Shelves lined the walls from floor to ceiling, leaving space for little else. Just across from Gehn was an ancient hearth. And then there was the door, of course. Otherwise there was nothing but shelves—not even any windows. Even the floor was covered in stacks of books—some new, some old—some piles of which had tumbled over, remaining where they fell, thick layers of dust covering their musty leather bindings, like ash on a volcano's slope.

Across from Gehn, between two standing shelves containing Gehn's own journals, was a smaller desk, laid out with pens and ink and a pile of copying books, like those his son wrote in.

Focusing on them, Gehn seemed to wake with a start and glanced at the timer that lay to his left on the desk.

"Kerath preserve me!" he muttered, getting up and pocketing the timer, realizing he was late.

He hurried across the room, then, taking the long silver key from the bunch attached to his waist, he unlocked the door and went outside, taking care to lock the door again before he turned and hurried down the narrow stone steps.

At the bottom of the steps lay the library. As Gehn stepped out, he saw that Atrus was seated at his desk in the far corner, his arms folded before him, his copybook open, ready.

"Father?"

Making no apology for his tardiness, Gehn strode across and, taking a long white chalk from the pot, turned to the great slate board and began to sketch out a D'ni word, taking great care as he did to demonstrate the flow of each stroke.

Turning back, he noted how attentively his son was watching him. Seeing him like that, Gehn felt a momentary frustration at the boy's innate placidity. Oh, it was a fine quality in a servant or in a subject species, but in a D'ni they were absurd. For a second or two, Gehn felt something akin to futility at the task he'd set himself.

Unaware, Atrus labored on, slowly copying down the figure from the board, his tongue poking between his lips as he painstakingly mimicked the shapes his father's hand had made to form the strokes and curls of the D'ni word.

"Atrus!"

The boy looked up. "Yes, father?"

"You must learn to concentrate. It is not easy, I know. It has taken me close to thirty years to master the art. But you must try hard, Atrus. You will achieve nothing unless you are willing to harness yourself to the yoke of learning."

Atrus, his head down, his eyes staring at his desk, nodded. "Yes, father."

"Good," Gehn said, placated by the boy's humility, by his willingness to listen to his father's instruction; by his innate quickness of mind. Then, seeing a way he might improve matters, he went across and took a large, extremely thick volume from one of the shelves and carried it across.

"Here," he said, setting it down on the desk beside Atrus's open workbook. "As it is clear that you need extra tuition, and as my own time is presently tied up in a number of experiments, I think we must try an experiment of a different kind."

Atrus looked up at him, his eyes eager suddenly.

"Yes, Atrus. This book is a very special book. It is called the *Rehevkor*. Once every school in D'ni had several copies of this book. From it pupils would learn how to write those fundamental D'ni words that formed the basic vocabulary of our race. I suppose the nearest comparison you would have for it is a lexicon, but this is far more complex."

Gehn took the edge of the massive cover and pulled the book open, then pointed down at the detailed diagrams that filled both pages.

"As you can see, each double-page spread concerns a single D'ni word, and shows clearly what pen strokes must be used and in what precise order. What I want you to do, Atrus, is to work through the *Rehevkor* from the first page to the last, concentrating on twenty words a night to begin with. I will provide you with a supply of copying books to work in, but you must promise me to practice these figures until they are second nature to you. Until you could sketch them in your sleep. You understand me, Atrus?"

"I understand."

"Good." Gehn reached out, closing the book, then made to turn away.

"Father?"

"Yes, Atrus?"

"How old is the text?"

"The *Rehevkor?*" Gehn turned back. "Ten thousand years old. Maybe older."

He saw the awe in his son's eyes at that and smiled inwardly. Atrus's eagerness, his clear appreciation of the greatness of the D'ni, was something that he, Gehn, could work upon.

"Father?"

Gehn sighed, for the briefest moment tempted to yell at the boy and tell him to stop this endless questioning. Then, realizing that he must be patient if he was to undo all the harm Anna had done to the child, he answered him.

"Yes, Atrus?"

"I just wondered why the sea is less bright now than it was earlier, that's all."

Gehn leaned back, relaxing. "That is easy to explain. The plankton has a thirty-hour cycle that corresponds with that of the D'ni. It sleeps when we sleep, and is most active when we are most active. Thus we have night and day down here. Of a distinctly black and orange kind."

If it was a joke, it was either a very bad one, or touched on something Atrus did not understand, yet Gehn seemed to find it funny, for his laughter went on for some while, and Atrus, pleased to discover that his father did, after all, possess a sense of humor, laughed with him.

§

Later, after Atrus had returned to his room, Gehn walked over to the central dais and, climbing up onto the marbled floor, looked about him at the great books where they rested on their pedestals.

Talking to Atrus about various matters, he had realized suddenly just how much he had missed the chance simply to talk these past fourteen years.

Alone. He had been so alone. Not emotionally, for he considered himself as emotionally self-sufficient as any man could be, but intellectually. He had missed the chance to stretch himself in debate, yes, and to demonstrate the vastness of his knowledge. And though the boy, as yet, was little more than a sounding board for his ideas, yet there was immense potential in him.

Yes, but then how could he have been certain that the boy even existed? The chances were that he had perished. After all, it was hard to imagine anyone surviving in that desolate little crack in the ground!

"Patience. I must have patience with the boy, and then, in time…"

But right now time was the one thing he found himself severely lacking. Over these past few weeks not one but several of his experiments had suddenly gone badly wrong, and he had been forced to spend more and more time attempting to deal with the problems that had arisen. To try to give Atrus as much attention as he needed was…well, impossible.

Still, Atrus was an obedient child. He could see that the boy tried his best. And maybe a few sessions with the *Rehevkor* would bring him up to scratch. Time would tell.

Right now, however, other matters needed his attention. Crossing the dais, Gehn stood over one of the open books, staring down at the descriptive box. Then he placed his hand upon it. A moment later he was gone.

8

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In the weeks that followed, Atrus fell heavily beneath his father's spell. Mornings he would work hard, repairing the walls and paths of the
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many-leveled island. Then, in the afternoons, after he had bathed and eaten, he would sit at his desk in the great library, while Gehn taught him the rudiments of D'ni culture.

Much of what Gehn taught him was familiar from his own reading and from things Anna had told him over the years, but there was also a great deal he had never heard before, and so he kept silent. Besides, now that he knew it was real, even those things he knew seemed somehow transformed: different simply because they *were* real.

For several days he had been working on the question of why the water at the north end of the island was clear of the light-giving plankton, and had traced the problem to the spillage from an old pipe that led down from his father's workroom. He had taken samples of that spillage and found traces of lead and cadmium in it—elements that were clearly poisoning the plankton. Not having the equipment to make a proper filter, he decided that, as the spillage was only a trickle, it would probably be best to block the pipe off altogether. He was busy doing this one morning, standing on the steps below the seawall, leaning across to fit the tiny stone cap he'd fashioned to block the end of the pipe, when Gehn came out to see him.

"Atrus?"

He turned and looked. His father stood at the head of the steps, cloaked and booted as if for a journey, looking out across the sea toward the great rock and the city beyond.

"Yes, father?"

"I have a new task for you."

Atrus straightened up, then threw the steel facing-tool he had been using down onto the sack beside him, waiting for his father to say more.

Gehn turned, combing his fingers through his ash-white hair, then looked to him. "I want you to come into the city with me, Atrus. I want you to help me find some books."

"The city? We're going to the city?"

Gehn nodded. "Yes, so you had better go and change. You will need your boots. And bring your knapsack, too."

Atrus hesitated a moment, then, with a curt nod to his father, gathered up his tools and hurried up the steps.

"I shall go down to the dock and prepare the boat," Gehn said, stepping back to let his son pass. "Meet me down there. And hurry now. I

want to be back before nightfall."

Gehn was standing at the stern of the boat, his hand on the tethering rope, ready to cast off, as Atrus came down the twist of stone steps and out into the low-ceilinged cave that housed the jetty.

Since that evening when he had first arrived on K'veer, Atrus had never been off the island. Nor had a day passed in all that time when he had not looked to the distant D'ni city and dreamed of going there.

Climbing aboard, he looked to his father for instruction.

"Sit there," Gehn said, pointing to a low bench that dissected the shallow craft. "And try not to lean over too far. I don't want to have to pull you out."

He nodded, chastened by his father's words.

As his father cast off, then swung the boat around, poling it out through the narrow entrance, Atrus turned in his seat, staring out across that vast expanse of orange sea, past the scattering of intervening islets, toward the D'ni capital, seeing yet again how its crowded levels climbed the cavern wall into the darkness.

Ancient, it was. Ancient beyond all imagining.

As they came out into the open water, Atrus turned, looking back as Gehn's island emerged into view. The day he'd arrived, he had been too exhausted to take in all its details, but now he stared, fascinated, seeing K'veer properly for the first time.

By now he knew every room and corridor, every stairway and terrace of the sprawling, many-leveled mansion, yet seeing it now from that slight distance he pieced it all together for the first time, making sense of it; seeing how its spiral shape had been determined by the rock on which it had been built.

From a quarter mile away its dark stone walls—fallen in places, shored up in others—gleamed almost metallically in the light from below.

It was a strange, unearthly vision, but no more so than any of the sights that met the eyes down here. Besides, the sensitivity of his eyes, which had meant he'd had to shield his eyes from the brightness of the desert sun, here was a positive advantage. He found this light soothing to his eyes…almost *natural*. Maybe the fact that he was part D'ni made his eyes weak. All he knew for certain was that he had not needed to wear his glasses down here, except for magnification.

Atrus looked to his father, conscious for the first time of just how distracted he was. In his own excitement he had missed his father's mood. As he watched, Gehn grimaced, as if some hideous thought had crossed his mind, then pulled hard on the oars, moving them along through the water.

Atrus turned, staring across at the city once again. Tiny islands littered the surrounding waters, each straddled by its own dark and sprawling mansion, each of those ancient buildings uniquely and distinctly shaped, and every last one of them in ruins.

On one of the larger islands, a strange, angular fortress had been built high up into the face of a massive cliff, embedded, it seemed, into the rock—a thing of spikes and towers and heavily buttressed walls. Beneath it the cliff dropped five hundred feet, sheer into the motionless sea.

Atrus let out a long breath, conscious more than ever of the desolate magnificence of this place.

As they steered through the last narrow channel, out into the open sea, he looked to his right, his eyes drawn by a disturbance on the water a quarter of a mile away. There was a kind of haze over the water, like windblown sand, that cast an erratic shadow on the orange surface. As he watched, it came nearer, attracted, perhaps, by the boat's slow passage through the plankton-rich water.

When it got to within fifty yards, he stood, openmouthed, staring at it, then looked to Gehn, but his father seemed not to have noticed.

"What's that?" he asked, intrigued, seeing tiny glittering shapes within the cloud.

Gehn glanced across. "Ah, those…They are a kind of damselfly. They feed on tiny insects that live within the plankton."

Atrus nodded, then turned back, watching in wonder as the cloud of insects drifted just aft of their boat's trail, unable to keep up with their progress. He was about to look away when suddenly the water beneath the cloud rippled violently and a long, thin snout poked out, stabbing the air. A moment later and the water beneath the damselflies began to thrash and boil as a host of brilliantly colored fish went into a feeding frenzy.

In less than thirty seconds the cloud was gone, the water calm again.

"And those?" Atrus asked, his voice almost a whisper.

"Fish," Gehn answered, with what seemed like aversion. "The water's much deeper out here beyond the islands. Usually they live deep

down, but they surface now and then to feed."

"I see," Atrus said quietly, suddenly wary of the placid waters that surrounded them, noting, through the clear yet glowing water, the presence of much larger, fleeting shadows in the depths.

Disturbed, he looked away, trying to focus his mind on something else.

Books…His father had said they were going to find some books. But Gehn had plenty of books. So what did he want with more of them?

"How long will it take us to get there?" he asked.

"Not long," Gehn answered patiently, pulling on the oars regularly, inexhaustibly, it seemed.

Atrus nodded. For a while he fiddled with his knapsack, then he looked back at his father.

Gehn was watching him, his large eyes half hooded. "What is it now, Atrus?"

Atrus swallowed, then asked what he'd been thinking. "The books…What's so special about the books? You said they can't make them anymore. I don't understand."

Gehn's face was blank, expressionless. "All in good time. Right now, all you have to do is find them for me."

§

Atrus dozed for a while, then woke with a start, surprised to find himself still on the boat, still traveling. Yawning, he stretched his neck, then looked up at his father.

Gehn smiled tightly. "So you're awake at last. Look. Just behind you. You almost missed it."

Atrus stood and turned…to find the city looming over him, seeming to fill the whole of the skyline, its ancient buildings rising level after level into the great ceiling of the cavern.

And, directly in front of him, an arch—bigger than any of those he had seen on his journey down. By comparison to the other D'ni architecture Atrus had seen, it seemed crude, made as it was of undecorated blocks, yet each block was the size of a great mansion, the whole thing ten blocks tall, its entrance so big that you could quite easily have passed even the largest of the islands through that gap.

“Kerath’s arch,” Gehn said proudly, staring ahead at it.

“Kerath…” Atrus whispered, the merest mention of his hero’s name enough to send a thrill through him.

“All of the D’ni kings sailed through this arch,” Gehn said. “They would be sent to the southlands to be tutored in the arts of kingship, then, after a year, they would come here to be crowned, on the harbor front, before the Steward’s House. A million citizens would watch the ceremony, and after there would be a whole month of feasting.”

And yet it was named after Kerath, Atrus thought. Because he was the greatest of them.

As they slowly sailed beneath it, Atrus could see how the stone was blotched and pitted, aged, not as the rocks of the desert were aged, by sand and wind, but like a skin that has grown tight and dry.

For countless thousands of years this arch has stood, he told himself, remembering, even as he did, the story of Kerath returning to D’ni on the back of the great lizard. Now, of course, he was forced to change the picture in his head—to imagine Kerath returning not across a desert, but across this vast open sea, the lizard, perhaps, resting peacefully beneath him on the boat.

The thought made him frown and wonder how much else he had imagined wrongly. Tre’Merktee, for instance, the Place of Poisoned Waters, did that still exist? He turned, looking to his father, but before he could ask the question, Gehn spoke to him again.

“You must stay close to me this first time, Atrus, and not wander off. Today we must confine our explorations to a single sector of the city.”

Gehn pointed past Atrus and to the right, indicating a part of the city not far from the main harbor.

“That is where we shall make our search, in the J’Taeri district. With luck we shall find what we are looking for in the Common Library there.”

Atrus nodded, then stepped up onto the prow, watching the city slowly appear from beneath the arch. Directly ahead of them massive walls of cracked white marble were arranged in three tiers, like giant steps, about the harbor.

At intervals along the front, a number of massive statues—each one several times the size of a man—had once stood, facing the arch, but only two were standing now, and even they were cracked and damaged.

The rest had been toppled from their pedestals and now lay, either in pieces on the marbled flagstones or on the floor of the harbor itself, broken limbs the size of pillars protruding from the glowing surface.

Beyond the statues, on the far side of an impressively huge square, was what looked like a huge, porticoed temple, fifteen white stone pillars holding up what remained of a massive dome. Beyond that, the city climbed, tier after tier of streets and buildings, covered walkways and delicate arches, no single level the same as another.

From afar the city had seemed an amorphous mass of stone. From close up, however, it revealed an intricacy and variety that was astonishing. Even the color of the stone changed as the eye traveled up that vast bowl of jumbled architecture, the lowest levels slate gray or a dull red-brown, the higher levels the same black streaked with red that was used for the island mansions and the Inner Gate.

What could also be seen from close up was the sheer extent of the devastation the D'ni capital had suffered. Wherever Atrus looked, he saw evidence of ruin and collapse. Indeed, there was barely a structure that was not damaged in some way or another.

He lowered his eyes, staring down through the pellucid water. Far down, so deep they seemed more shadows than actualities, he could see the remains of the great fleet of merchants' barges that had once anchored here.

"Was it the quake that killed the people?" Atrus asked, looking back at his father.

Gehn ignored him, concentrating on the task of bringing the boat alongside one of the great stone pillars that supported the jetty. He brought the small craft to a halt alongside the pillar. A rope ladder dangled from the jetty above, trailing against the side of the cracked stone.

He glanced at Atrus, then signaled that he should climb the ladder, holding it taut from below while Atrus climbed the rungs. Then, as Atrus neared the top, he tied the mooring rope to the bottom of the ladder and began his own ascent.

Atrus stepped up onto the jetty, more awed by his surroundings now that he actually stood among them than he'd been while sailing into that massive harbor. He looked back at the brutal shape of Kerath's arch, which dominated the natural bowl of the harbor, then slowly turned full circle.

Gehn climbed up beside him. “Come, Atrus, let us make up time.” He pointed across the square toward the shattered dome. “Our destination is over there.”

The great square might once have been immaculately kept, but now it was littered with huge chunks of stone that had fallen from the city above. In places huge cracks ran in zigzags through the marble paving, while in others the ground simply vanished into tiny craters.

The Steward’s House itself was a study in desolation. The great dome was two-thirds gone, only three of the fifteen great curving spans of roof still intact, and the great doors had fallen from their hinges. Inside, there was evidence that the rooms and corridors had been put to the torch, possibly long before the final tragedy had struck. Overhead, charred beams stood out against the stony skyline.

Atrus stared at his father’s back, wondering what they were doing there inside that ruined place, but Gehn barely glanced at his surroundings, making his way directly down the main corridor before turning right into a small room at the back of the building.

It looked like a kind of pantry kitchen.

Atrus watched as Gehn walked over to one of the shelves and, reaching to the back of it, seem to pull something toward him. There was a low clunking sound, as if something were sliding back beneath their feet.

Gehn turned, a brief smile flickered across his features, then crossed the room and, edging behind a long stone workbench, placed his hands flat against the wall, moving them back and forth as if searching for something.

With a little grunt of satisfaction, he flexed his shoulders and pushed. At once a whole section of the wall swung back and tilted to the side, sliding into a niche in the rock behind.

An unlit passage was revealed, leading up into the rock.

It was all done so effortlessly, so quietly, that Atrus stood there a moment, staring in disbelief.

Gehn turned, beckoning to him. “Come on then, boy! What are you waiting for?”

Atrus went across and ducked inside, then stopped, unable to see more than a few feet in front of him.

“Here,” Gehn said, pressing a lantern into one hand and a fire-marble into the other.

Atrus crouched, balancing the lantern on his knee, while he fitted the fire-marble, then, as it began to glow, he straightened up. Turning, he saw his father light his own lantern, then look to him.

In that fierce blue glow Gehn's eyes seemed huge and unnatural. Looking into them, Atrus realized how much a stranger his father remained, even after all these weeks. He still knew so little about him.

"I shall go ahead," Gehn said, unaware, it seemed, of his son's close scrutiny. "But keep up with me, Atrus. These tunnels are like a maze. If you fall behind and lose sight of me, you are likely never to find your way out."

Atrus nodded nervously, then, as his father squeezed past him and began to make his way down the sloping curve of the tunnel, hurried to keep up.

Behind Atrus there was the grating of the stone as the wall slid back into place. A dull, resounding thud echoed up the tunnel after him.

Passages led off to either side, some leading up, others down into the earth, but Gehn kept striding straight ahead. It was a good ten minutes before he stopped and, turning, making sure Atrus was still with him, pointed up a narrow flight of steps.

"It's a long climb," he said, "but quicker than trying to get there by the lanes."

Up and up the steps went, twisting first to the right and then back to the left, as if following some natural fault in the rock. Briefly it opened out into a narrow chamber with a balcony overhead and stone benches cut into the rock, then it went on again, climbing more steeply.

"Not far now," Gehn said finally, as the steps ended and they came out into a relatively flat piece of tunnel.

"Who made these paths?" Atrus asked, noting the words and patterns carved into this final stretch of wall.

"That," Gehn answered, "is a mystery. For when people have been in a location as long as the D'ni have been here, then many things are done the reasons for which are either unknown or lost in the haze of time. That said, I should imagine there have been tunnels here since the very beginning. Some scholars—the great Jevasi among them—claim that the wall of the cavern is so riddled with them, that were any more to be cut then the whole great edifice would cave in upon itself!"

Atrus narrowed his eyes, imagining it.

Just ahead there was a glimpse of orange light. It grew, until he could see the tunnel's exit outlined up ahead.

They came out into a narrow, unfurnished room. Above them the ceiling gaped. One could look straight up at the roof of the great cavern. This, Atrus knew, was the D'ni style. Only a very few of their buildings—official residences, like the Steward's House—had roofs, the rest were open to the air. After all, what need was there for roofing when the rain never fell and there was never any variation in the temperature? At most a typical D'ni dwelling would have a thick awning of some kind stretched over its topmost story, and some of the two- and three-story buildings didn't even bother with that, their occupants sleeping and bathing in the lower floors.

The room led out onto a small balcony. To the right a set of steps led down into a narrow lane. Atrus went to the rail, looking down he empty thoroughfare, fascinated by the jumble of gray stone buildings that met his gaze, the labyrinth of walkways and stairways and covered paths.

They went on, their heels clicking on the worn stone. The narrow lane curved to the left, climbing slowly between high walls that, in places, were cracked and fallen. Behind those walls lay a number of imposing-looking mansions, surprisingly few of which had collapsed, leading Atrus to think that they had been built to survive such shocks.

It was a strange and fascinating place to be, and as he walked, a familiar voice sounded in his head, asking the question it always asked.

Atrus? What do you see?

He hesitated, then:

I see faded paint on the walls. I see boards at windows and piles of rubbish, untended thirty years. I see…disrepair and dereliction. Signs of shared habitation. Abandoned sedans and ragged washing hung on threadbare lines.

Good. And what do you make of it?

He looked about him once more, then answered Anna in his head:

The mansions are old and grand, from a time when this was, perhaps, a respectable, even fashionable place to live, yet in more recent times this must have been a poor district: a place of considerable squalor, even before the great quake did its worst.

Good. Then why has your father come here? What could he possibly want in a place like this?

Books, he answered silently, yet it hardly seemed a good enough reason. Why should his father want more books?

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At the end of a broad, once tree-lined avenue bordered by massive houses, stood the D'ni gatehouse. It was a huge, squat, square thing with twin turrets and a pair of massive studded doors that were closed against them. On the great slab of a lintel above the doors, two D'ni words had been cut deep into the ancient stone. Looking up at it, Atrus translated it in his head.

District of J'Taeri.

Stepping up to the left-hand door, Gehn braced himself, then leaned against it, straining against it, but despite his efforts it did not move even the tiniest amount. Gehn turned, looking about him, then walked across, venturing into the garden of one of the nearby houses, to emerge a moment later with a heavy-looking piece of metal, clearly the ornamental spout of a fountain.

Standing before the doors again, Gehn lifted the thick rod of metal high then swung it against the wood, aiming for the lock. There was a cracking sound and splinters flew, but the door held firm. Grunting loudly, Gehn raised the spout time and again, smashing it against the door, the wood splintering more and more each time. Finally, on the seventh or eighth blow, the lock fell away.

Gehn threw the spout down, then, leaning against the door, he heaved, his whole body straining, his neck muscles taut. Slowly but surely the massive door eased back.

Then went through, into J'Taeri.

The buildings here were smaller but much better maintained than in the district they had left, yet both had that same feeling of immense age, of ancient histories piled up layer upon layer like geological strata. In places, where it had not been replaced, the stone floor of the lanes was so worn by the passage of millions of feet over the millennia that it dipped markedly in the center, its appearance fluid, like wax that had melted and re-formed, that likeness reinforced by the dark red of the stone.
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Coming to a massive crossroads—a place where covered walkways crisscrossed overhead, and tunnels dipped darkly into the earth—Gehn stopped and took the small tanned leather notebook from his pocket, studying it closely.

Atrus had often noticed Gehn consulting the book, which seemed to contain information on all manner of things, yet strangely he had never seen him write in it.

Maybe he does it at night, when I'm not there, Atrus though, thinking of his own journal. Or maybe he doesn't need to. Maybe he's already mapped out where everything is in this city.

To be honest, he was in awe of his father's knowledge of the capital. Gehn seemed to know every street, every important building in D'ni. And even when he didn't, he was sure to have it in his book.

Closing the notebook, Gehn pointed up the avenue to his left.

"We need to go this way. The main square is ten minutes' walk from here."

Atrus waited as Gehn tucked the book away, then set off again, silently following his father, staring about him as he walked.

The houses in J'Taeri were richly furnished; not only that, but there were huge pentagonal stone shields on many of the houses, decorated with symbols identical to those on Gehn's tunic, the night he'd come to the cleft to claim Atrus.

Curious, Atrus had asked Gehn what they were and had discovered that they were Guild badges, and that those who lived in the houses that displayed them were senior Guild members.

J'Taeri, it transpired, had been a Guild district, and thus something of an anomaly in that the families who had once stayed there were not from the locality, but were drafted in to oversee Guild activities in the lower districts.

The houses were very different in J'Taeri; more elaborate in their design. Some of them reminded Atrus of the forms he had glimpsed in the caverns traveling to D'ni—seeming to mimic the form of dripstone and flowstone, narrow towers pushing up from their walls like great stalagmites, while large draperies of lacelike stone decorated their front arches. Others, much more prevalent, were constructed to resemble great slabs of rock, three or four stories resting one atop another like layers of smoothed slate, no sign of any doors or windows evident to the casual eye.

Two of the bigger houses stood out, not just because of their imposing design but also because they were made of the jet black, red-streaked stone he had noticed was used mainly in the uppermost levels of the city, and again he asked Gehn what, if anything, this signified.

"Those were the houses of important men," Gehn had answered distractedly. "Only the very rich could afford to build with such materials."

The avenue opened out onto a massive square enclosed by high stone walls, on the far side of which was a building that resembled the Steward's House. Six broad white marble steps led up into the shadowed portico. Remarkably, its façade had survived the quake almost intact.

On the top step Atrus turned, looking out across the labyrinth of walls and rooftops toward the harbor far below, the great arch dominating the skyline, its top almost level with them. Then, turning back, he stepped up into the shadows of the Common Library.

Inside, beyond a row of five cracked pillars, was a small entrance hall, its floor covered in a mosaic. A dark, jagged crack ran through the center of it, but the picture was still clear. It showed a man standing beside a lectern, on which lay an open book, exactly like the books which stood on the pedestals in his father's library back on K'veer. The man's hand hovered just above the image on the page.

On the far side of the hall were two doorways, one to the left, one on the right. Cut into the plinth over the left-hand door was the D'ni symbol for "Enter," while on the plinth to the right the same symbol had a circle about it, from which jutted seven short, wedge-shaped rays, like a star. From Anna's lessons he recognized it as the D'ni negative. That sign read "Do Not Enter."

He went to the left-hand door. It opened onto a long, caged passageway with ornately latticed sides of interwoven bronze and iron that went directly down the middle of a much bigger sloping corridor, the cracked walls of which were covered in carvings of open fields and blazing suns, and of men and women standing in those fields wearing strange glasses—*his* glasses, Atrus realized with a start of surprise!—as they looked up into those limitless, unfamiliar heavens.

At the end of the caged walk was a barrier. Gehn vaulted it effortlessly and walked on, into a big, high-ceilinged gallery, on the far

side of which was a massive stone screen. Behind that could be seen three tall, black-painted doors.

Atrus clambered over the barrier, then went across, joining his father.

“Over there, through those doors, is the Book Room,” Gehn said. “From there the common people of D’ni would have the opportunity of traveling to an Age.”

He looked to Atrus, clearly proud of his race’s achievements.

“Did *everybody* use these places?”

Gehn shook his head. “No. That is why they are called the Common Libraries. These places were for the common, workingmen and women of D’ni. The great families had their own books, their own Ages. They were rigidly administered by the Guilds, just as these Ages were, yet they were exclusive. Only those permitted by the families could enter them.”

Atrus frowned. “And the harvest worlds?”

“Those were Guild worlds. The books they used were specialized books, much less restrictive than the ordinary books. They had to be to take the great loads that were regularly brought back from those Ages.”

Gehn gestured toward the doors. “Anyway, let us go inside.”

Following his father, Atrus went around the screen and through the central doorway, into a big, long chamber filled with pedestals, divided in two by a central walkway, the whole thing mounted on a huge, white marble dais. Barely half the pedestals now stood, and the great dais itself was riven with cracks. There was no ceiling to the chamber, but overlooking it was a railed balcony, parts of which had fallen away. Even so, looking up at it, Atrus could imagine the cloaked Guildmembers standing there like gods, calmly supervising the comings and goings down below.

Atrus stepped up beside his father. On the nearest pedestal lay an open book, its thick leather cover secured to the lectern by a heavy gold chain.

“Here they are,” Atrus said.

Gehn looked to him. “No. Those are of no use to us.”

Atrus frowned, not understanding, but Gehn had crouched and was examining the top of one of the elaborately decorated pedestals, his fingers feeling beneath the beveled edge. With a huff of disappointment he

straightened up, moving quickly on to the next, examining that, again with the same response.

While he was doing so, Atrus stepped up to the pedestal and looked down at the image on the right-hand page.

He frowned. It was dark, only the vaguest outline visible. Then he understood. There was a thick layer of dust over the "window," suspended there just a fraction above the page.

He went to touch it, to brush it aside, but Gehn, who had seen what he was about to do, grabbed his hand and pulled it away, gripping it tightly and shaking it as he spoke.

"You must *never* do that, Atrus! *Never!* You understand? For all you knew, that Age might be dead, destroyed by some calamity. You would be drawn into an airless void."

"I'm sorry," Atrus said, his voice very small.

Gehn sighed, then released his hand.

"The Art can be a dangerous thing, Atrus. That is why the D'ni took great precautions to protect these books and ensure they were not misused."

"Misused?"

But Gehn had already moved away, searching again. He was crouched down, studying the edge of one of the pedestals in the second row.

"Atrus. Come over here."

Atrus frowned, but did as he was told, stepping up beside his father.

"I want you to search all of these pedestals for a catch or switch of some kind."

"Father?"

Gehn pointed to the door at the far end of the chamber. "We need to go inside. Somewhere here there is a switch or lever that will let us in."

Atrus set to work, examining the pedestals, one after another, until, with a little cry of excitement, he found a tiny brass hemisphere set into the back of one of the great stone lecterns.

He pressed it. At once the door on the far side of the room slid open.

"Good," Gehn said, straightening, then making his way across.

“Is this it?” Atrus said, standing in the doorway, staring with disappointment into what seemed like an unfurnished corridor from which no doors led out.

“No,” Gehn said, turning to look back into the main gallery. “The Book Room is below. I hoped the trapdoor would be open, but it looks like we shall have to force our way in.”

As his father stepped out again, Atrus moved past him, noticing for the first time the big square slab of stone that hung like a painting against the left-hand wall.

Standing before it, Atrus frowned. From its smooth surface protruded a number of geometric symbols—stars and semicircles, triangles and squares, and several others—arranged in what appeared to be a haphazard fashion.

Atrus squinted at it, trying to make out what it was he had noticed. There was a pattern. No…not a pattern, a progression. Each symbol had a mathematical value, and if you took those values…

A map. It was a map!

Gehn came back into the room, carrying one of the fallen pedestals, his muscles straining as he kept the massive piece of marble balanced against his chest and shoulder.

“Out of the way!” he gasped, then, lifting the huge stone with both hands, heaved it right through the middle of the slab, embedding it in the wall.

“But father…”

“Mind back, boy,” Gehn said, ignoring him, grasping the pedestal once again, and beginning to extricate it from the wall, heaving at it and rocking it back and forth until it came free.

But I could have solved the puzzle, Atrus said silently, as his father threw the pedestal aside, revealing, behind the slab, a matrix of metal pullies and wires.

He watched as his father pulled and pushed at the wires, trying to work the mechanism that activated the trapdoor. For a moment there was nothing, and then there was a resounding click as something slotted into place.

“Stand over by the door, Atrus,” Gehn said, gesturing to him with one hand, the other buried deep inside the workings of the mechanism.

Atrus did as he was told, then watched as his father made a small little movement of his shoulder.

There was the hiss of hydraulics and then a low grating sound. A moment later a two-by-three rectangle of the floor beside them began to sink into the earth with a loud hissing noise, revealing a stairway.

Atrus followed his father down, into a large, well-lit space, filled with long workbenches piled high with all manner of clutter. Shelves crowded the walls. Eight cloaked skeletons sat in their chairs, slumped forward over their work. Another—their supervisor?—lay where he had fallen against the far wall.

"What *is* this place?" Atrus asked, sniffing the musty air, noting that the seated skeletons were chained to their desks.

"This is the main Book Room," Gehn answered. But there was no sign of any books in that chamber. The shelves were crowded with all manner of things—boxes and bottles, papers and files, tools for writing and carving—but no books. Of *books*, at least of the kind that Gehn seemed to want, there was no sign. There were only those upstairs, and it was clear that Gehn did not want *them.*

Atrus stared at his father, confused. But Gehn was looking about purposefully, searching the nearest shelves as if he might unearth real treasures here.

"What should I look for?" he asked, after a moment.

Gehn turned, staring at him, as if he had forgotten he was there, then gestured to a door at the back of the room, behind the stairway they'd come down.

"Have a look in there, Atrus. There should be a narrow passageway with four or five rooms off it. One of them will be the bookstore. If it is locked, call me. But it should be open. They would not have had time to lock it."

No, Atrus thought, beginning to understand how quickly catastrophe had fallen upon D'ni. At night, so his father had said, while most decent folk were in their beds.

Gehn turned away, rummaging among the shelves, stopping to take out a strange-looking glass vial and shake it, then throwing it aside.

Atrus watched him a moment longer then went through, finding it exactly as Gehn had described. The passageway was eight paces long. Two doors led off to the left, two to the right; one lay directly ahead. He tried

that first, noting the D'ni "Book" symbol cut into the center of the elaborate carved pattern on its polished wooden surface.

The door swung back silently on its hinges at his touch. Inside was the tiniest of rooms—almost a cupboard it was so small—with broad shelves on all three sides, reaching up into the ceiling space well above his head.

Most of those were empty, but on one of the higher shelves there were seven, no eight, of the big, leather-bound books.

Atrus reached up and pulled one down, a red-covered book, surprised by how heavy it was, as if it were made of something more than paper. Then, kneeling, he placed it on the floor in front of him and opened it.

Nothing! The pages were blank. Disappointed, he closed the book and slipped it back into its place, then took another, this time with a pale green leather cover. That, too, proved blank. One by one he took the books down, certain that he would find at least one that had something written in it, but they were all, as far as he could see, the same.

Defeated, he placed one of the books beneath his arm and went outside, walking back down the passageway despondently.

Gehn had cleared a space on one of the workbenches and was bent over what looked like a wooden tray filled with a dozen or so large amber-colored inkpots. After a moment, he straightened, holding up one of the big, five-sided crystals to examine it, its rich amber color reflected in Gehn's pallid face. Then, noticing Atrus standing there, he looked across.

"Well? Did you find any?"

"It's no good," Atrus said, steeling himself against his father's anger. "There's nothing in them."

Putting the inkpot back in the case, Gehn came and took the book from Atrus. "Here, let me see that."

He opened it and flicked through a number of pages, then looked up again. "This is fine. This is just what I was looking for. Are there others?"

Atrus went to shake his head, then nodded, utterly confused now. "But I thought…I thought you wanted ones with Ages in them. These… these are just books."

Gehn laughed. "No, Atrus. These are not just books, these are *Kortee-nea*. Blank books, waiting to be written."

Written…Atrus stared at his father.

Gehn unslung his knapsack and slid the book inside it, then looked to Atrus again. “How many books are there in the store?”

“Eight.”

“Good. Then bring them back in here. There is ink here,” he said, gesturing toward the case of amber-colored pots, “and pens, too, so we have everything we need. Come then. Quick now, boy. We can be home by supper!”

10

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“Atrus?”

Atrus looked up from his desk to where Gehn stood on the far side of the library.

“Yes, father?” he said, setting his pen aside, careful not to drip any ink across the copy paper.

“Come with me.”

Atrus stood uncertainly, then, skirting the dais at the center of the room, joined his father at the foot of the steps.

Two weeks had passed since the expedition into the city, and Atrus had begun to think that his father had forgotten his promise, but Gehn was smiling now.

“Are you ready, Atrus?”

“Ready, father?”

“To begin your work. It is time you learned how to Write.”

He followed Gehn up into a large, yet strangely claustrophobic room. At first he didn’t understand why, then he realized that it had been cut directly from the surrounding rock, which was why, perhaps, the ceiling was so low—a cave within a cave.

Books crowded the undecorated stone walls and were heaped up on the floor on all sides, while in the center of the room was a large desk, lit by a curiously shaped lamp—the only source of illumination in that dim and musty place. Facing that massive desk was another smaller one that had been cleared.

Gehn led him across, standing Atrus to one side while he sat in his chair and, reaching into one of the drawers, drew out a shallow metal tray
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on which was a large quill pen and a number of the amber-colored ink pots they had found on their first book hunt.

Setting the tray to one side, Gehn leaned across and pulled one of the big, leather-bound books toward him—its brown cover flecked with white—opening it to the first page.

It was blank.

He looked up at Atrus, his pale eyes fixing his son. “You have spent six weeks now, learning how to copy a number of basic D’ni words and have discovered just how complex and beautiful a script it is. But those characters also *mean* something, Atrus. Something much more than you’ve previously understood. And not just in this world. They were developed over tens of thousands of years for a specific task—that of describing Ages…of *creating* other worlds. They are not like the words you and I speak casually, nor can they be used so in the books. Writing—D’ni Writing—is not merely an Art, it is a science. The science of precise description.”

He turned, looking to the blank page. “When we begin, there is nothing. It is…*uncreated*. But as soon as the first word is written—just as soon as that first character is completed, the last stroke set down upon the page—then a link is set up to that newly created world, a bridge established.”

Atrus frowned. “But where does it lead, this bridge?”

“Anywhere,” Gehn answered, glancing at him as he removed the lid of the amber-colored crystal ink pot. “The D’ni called it Terokh Jeruth, the great tree of possibility.”

Atrus laughed. “It sounds like magic!”

“And so it is. But you and I are D’ni, and so I shall share a secret with you. We are not ordinary men, Atrus, we are *gods!*”

“Gods?” Atrus stared back at his father, bewildered.

“Yes,” Gehn went on fervently, his eyes lit with a passion Atrus had never seen in him before. “Common men but dream and wake. We, however, can live our dreams. Within limit—limits that the finest D’ni minds took great care to define over the millennia—we can create whatever we can visualize. We use words to conjure worlds.”

Atrus’s mouth had fallen open.

“Why, I could show you worlds so rich, so vivid in their detail, that they would make you want to burst with admiration for their makers.

Worlds of such splendor and magnificence that they make this marvelous world of ours seem ordinary!”

Gehn laughed, then held the ink pot up for Atrus to see. Within the thick, yellow, glasslike walls of the container, was a fine black liquid.

“What do you see, Atrus?”

Atrus looked up, meeting his father’s eyes, momentarily startled by that echo of Anna’s customary words.

“Ink?”

“Yes…but not just any ink. It has special powers that ordinary ink does not possess. So, too, with the pages of the book. They are made of a special paper, the formula for which was kept secret by the Guild.”

“And the pen?” Atrus asked, pointing to it. “Is that special, too?”

Gehn smiled. “No. The pen is but a pen. However, if anyone else tried to do what we are about to do—anyone, that is, without D’ni blood—then they would fail. It would be impossible.”

Turning to face the page, Gehn set the ink pot down, then, dipping the metallic tip of the quill into it, lifted the pen above the page and began to write.

Slowly a D’ni character—the word “island,” Atrus noted—began to form, its intense blackness *burned* almost into the pure white surface by the pen.

Gehn wrote another dozen characters onto the page, then lifted the pen and looked to Atrus.

“Is it done?” Atrus asked, surprised that there had not been more. He had expected fireworks or the heavens to open. “Have you made a new Age?”

Gehn laughed. “It exists, yes…but as yet it is very crude. It takes a great deal of work to create an Age. There are special formulas you have to follow, precise laws to obey. As I said, it is not simply an Art, it is a science—the science of precise description.”

He gestured toward the open book. “As yet, I have merely sketched out the most basic elements of my new world. Ahead lies an immense amount of hard work. Every aspect of the Age must be described, each new element fitted in. But that is not all.”

Reaching across, Gehn took another, much smaller book from a pile at the side and held it out to Atrus. “Once the Age is complete, one must always—*always*—make a Linking Book.”

Atrus took the small book and opened it, noting at once how few pages were in it. All of them were blank.

"Yes," Gehn continued. "Whenever you travel to a newly written Age you must always carry a Linking Book with you. If you did not, you would be trapped there, without any way of traveling back."

Atrus looked back at his father, wide-eyed. "But what's actually in one of these Linking Books?"

Gehn took the book back. "Each Linking Book refers to one of the larger descriptive books—to one specific book. You might say that it contains the essence of the larger book—certain phrases and words that fuses it to that book and no other. But that is not all. For a Linking Book to work, it must also include an accurate description of the place one wishes to link to on that particular Age, which is recorded by writing a special D'ni symbol, a Garo-hertee. Yes, and a Linking Book must be written in the Age and location it is meant to link to. And so a Linking Book is, in a sense, a working substitute for a descriptive book."

Atrus thought a moment, then. "And can there be only one Linking Book for each descriptive book?"

"Not at all," Gehn answered, delighted by his son's understanding. Then, setting the slender book back on the pile, he added, "You can make as many Linking Books as you want. But you must always make at least one. That is the first rule. One you must not forget."

Atrus nodded, then, "But what if you change the Age? What if you decide to write more in the descriptive book? Would the Linking Book cease to work?"

"No. If the descriptive book is changed, then all Linking Books associated with it will link to the changed world."

Atrus's eyes lit, imagining it, only now realizing just how complex and powerful this Writing was. "It sounds…*astonishing!*"

"Yes," Gehn said, his eyes looking back at Atrus, godlike and wise beyond all human years. "Oh, it *is*, Atrus. It is."

§

That night, Atrus decided he would speak to his father, to remind him that it was almost time for them to go back and visit Anna.

Encouraged by Gehn's high spirits over supper, Atrus waited until he had lit his pipe and settled back in his chair in the corner of the kitchen before he broached the subject.

"Father?"

Gehn stretched his legs and stared at his boots, the gently-glowing pipe cradled in his lap. "Yes?"

"When are we going back?"

Gehn looked to him languidly. "Back? Back where?"

"To the cleft."

Surprisingly, Gehn laughed. "*There?* You want to go back there?"

"Yes," Atrus said quietly. "You said…"

"I said I would try. I said…"

Gehn sat up and, setting the pipe aside, leaned toward Atrus. "I said that to keep your grandmother quiet. I never meant…" He shrugged, then started again. "Look, Atrus, it would take us the best part of four or five days to get there and another three or four to return here. And for what?"

"Well, couldn't you write a book to the cleft and bring her here?"

And how would you set about writing such a book? This world has already been created."

"Then can't you write a Linking Book?"

Atrus stopped, realizing that, of course, he couldn't. He would have to be at the cleft in order to write that Linking Book.

Gehn watched him, seeing that he understood, then spoke softly. "I should, perhaps, have said you cannot link to another location in the Age you are in. It is impossible."

Atrus was silent a moment, then. "But you told me you would take me back."

"Oh, Atrus, grow up! There's nothing there."

Atrus looked down. "But you *promised*. You said…"

Gehn stood. "I simply do not have the time, and even if I did, I would scarcely waste it going there. The place is a pit, Atrus. Literally so. Besides, that woman is poisonous. Don't you understand that yet? I *had* to take you away from there."

"You're wrong," Atrus said quietly.

But Gehn simply shook his head and pointed at the chair. "Sit down. I shall tell you a story. Then you can tell me if I am wrong or not."

Atrus sat, angry still and resentful, refusing to meet his father's eyes.

"Close to thirty years ago, when I was but a child of four, there was a war. A young man named Veovis started it. He was the son of a nobleman, and the sole heir to a powerful estate. In time he would have become one of the ruling Council, a lawmaker. But he was not content with what he had, nor with the promise of what would be. Veovis broke D'ni law. He abused his privileged position."

"In what way?"

"His crimes were heinous, unmentionable. He was a cancer that needed to be cut from the D'ni culture. Eventually he was caught and, despite his father's intercession, he was tried before the Five Lords. For more than twenty days witnesses gave evidence. Finally, the Five gave their decision. Veovis was to be imprisoned. To be kept in a place from which he would never escape. But before the decision of the Five could be implemented, several of Veovis's young friends helped him to flee D'ni.

"For six months, nothing was heard of Veovis, and it was assumed that the problem had taken care of itself. But then rumors began to circulate. Rumors that Veovis had taken a new name and was to be found in the drinking houses of the lower city, stirring up discontent against the ruling faction.

"At first, nothing was done. Rumors were only rumors, it was argued. But then a number of incidents occurred. A stabbing of a senior official in one of the guilds. A bomb in one of the main ink works. The desecration of a book."

Atrus frowned, not understanding, but his father was staring off into the distance, caught up in his recollections.

"After this last incident, a Council meeting was called. At last, they decided to take action. But already it was too late. Veovis had indeed been staying in the lower city. Furthermore, he had been fermenting trouble among the lower classes. What none of the ruling Council could have known, however, was just how deep that discontent ran, nor how raw a nerve Veovis had touched. Only two days after the Council met, serious rioting broke out in one of the lower city districts. Before curfew that evening, the whole of the lower city was in chaos as the mob roamed the streets, maiming or killing whoever dared to stand against them."

Gehn stopped, turning to face Atrus.

“As I said, I was but a child at the time. I was staying in one of the great Guild houses in the upper precincts. My home was several miles away, on a great bluff of rock that I could see from one of the windows in the refectory. I remember standing there all that afternoon, as the roar of the mob and the awful cries of the dying came up to us from below, and wondering if it was the end. It was a terrible time, made worse by my fears for my own family. We were safe in the Guild houses, of course. At the first sign of trouble, the Council had barred the gates to the upper city and trebled the guard. But many on the outlying estates died that day, victims of their own servants—men and women they had trusted all their lives.

“It was fully six weeks before the last of the rebels was subdued and Veovis himself captured, trying to make his escape through the lower tunnels.”

“This time, when the Five met, their decision was unanimous. Veovis was to die. He was to be executed, there on the steps of the Great Library.”

Gehn looked away, clearly pained by what came next, then spoke again. “It was a wise decision. Yet before it could be sealed and passed as law, one final witness stepped forward, begging their leave to speak out on the young man’s behalf.”

Ti’ana, Atrus thought, recalling what Anna had told him.

Gehn slowed once more, staring out past Atrus. “That witness was a woman, Ti’ana.”

Atrus opened his mouth, aching to finish the tale—to show his father what he knew—but Gehn seemed not to be aware of him. He spoke on, in the grip of the tale; a sudden bitterness in his voice.

“Ti’ana was much respected by the Five and so they let her speak. In her view, the danger had passed. Veovis had done his worst and D’ni had survived. Furthermore, she argued, if it had not been Veovis, some other rabble-rouser would have stirred the mob to action, for the discontent had not been that of a single man, but of the whole class. In the circumstances, she said, her eloquence swaying those venerable lords, should not the Council’s original decision be carried out?”

Coming to the bottom of the steps, Gehn stepped out onto the second ledge and, looking to his son, sighed deeply. “And so it was done, Atrus. Veovis was placed inside his prison. The prison from which he could not escape.”

Gehn paused, his eyes on Atrus. “It was three days later when it happened. They had checked on him, of course, morning and evening, but on the evening of that third day, the guard who was sent did not return. Two more were sent, and when they returned, it was with the news that the prison was empty. There was no sign of either Veovis or the guard.

“They should have known that something was seriously wrong, but they had not learned their lessons. And when Veovis did not reappear, they assumed that all was well, that he had fled—who knew where?—and would not be seen again. But Veovis was a vengeful young man who had seen his hopes dashed twice in the space of a year. Only a fool would think he’d simply go away and lick his wounds. Only a fool…”

Atrus blinked, surprised by the sudden anger in his father’s voice.

“And so it was that Veovis *did* return. And this time it was not in the company of an unwashed and uncontrollable rabble, but at the head of a small but well-trained force of fanatics who had but one thing in their minds: to destroy D’ni. Ti’ana was wrong, you see. The danger had not passed, nor had Veovis done his worst.”

“But she was not to know, surely?”

“No?” Gehn shook his head, a profound disappointment in his face. “The woman was a foolish meddler. And my father no less a fool for listening to her.”

“Your father?”

“Yes,” Gehn said, walking across to the edge and standing there, looking out across the ruined landscape. “Or is that something else she hasn’t told you?”

“She?”

“Anna. Your grandmother.”

“I…I don’t understand. What has she got to do with it?”

Gehn laughed bleakly. “You still do not know?”

“Know what?”

And now Gehn turned and looked at him again, his face hard. “That she *was* Ti’ana. Anna, I mean. That was her D’ni name, given to her by my father—your grandfather—when he married her.”

Atrus stared, shock in his face. “No. *No*. It isn’t possible. She would have said.”

“It’s true,” Gehn said bitterly. “Her words destroyed it…her *meddling*. It would all have been over, finished with. Veovis would have

been dead, the threat dealt with, but no…she had to interfere. She could not help herself. As if she knew *best* all the while! She would never listen. *Never!*"

Atrus shook his head, unable to believe it.

"Did she ever tell you about *me*, Atrus? *Did* she? No! Of course not! So ask yourself, what else did she fail to tell you?"

"But she couldn't have!" he blurted, unable to help himself. "She *couldn't!*"

"No?" For a moment Gehn stared at him, as if studying an exhibit beneath a microscope. "You should not let sentiment blind you, Atrus. The world we inhabit is a harsh one, and sentiment can kill just as surely as a falling rock. It was a lesson your grandmother never learned. And that is why I cannot let you go back to her. For your own good."

Atrus was silent a moment, staring down at his hands where they were clasped in his lap. Then he spoke again, his voice quiet now, lacking the defiant conviction it had had only minutes before.

"Anna was good to me. She looked after me, made sure I never starved. Yes, and she taught me, too."

"*Taught* you?" Gehn's laughter was scathing. "Taught you what? How to survive in a crack? How to eat dust and dream of rain, I bet!"

"No!" Atrus yelled, hurt now and confused and angry—angrier than he'd ever been-though at who it was hard to tell. "She taught me more than *you've* ever taught me!"

Gehn's laughter died. He stepped across and stood over Atrus, looking down at him coldly, threateningly. "What did you say?"

Atrus lowered his eyes, intimidated by his father's physical presence. "I said she taught me more than you."

Gehn reached down with his right hand, gripped Atrus's chin, and forced him to look at him. "Tell me, boy. What did that woman ever teach you that was any use at all?"

He shrugged off Gehn's hand and moved his head back. "She taught me D'ni, that's what!"

Gehn laughed and shook his head. "Taught you to lie, more like!"

Atrus met his father's eyes squarely, then spoke slowly, calmly, in fluent D'ni."

"She taught me what is good and what is to be valued, those truths which cannot be shaken or changed."

Slowly, like the sunlight bleeding from the horizon at the day's end, the mocking smile faded from Gehn's lips.

"You mean, you *knew?*" Gehn said coldly. "All this while?" His face was hard now, his eyes cold. Once again there seemed something dangerous—something frightening—about him. "You sat there all that time, pretending not to know? *Mocking* me?"

"No," Atrus began, wanting to explain, but Gehn was not listening. Grasping Atrus with both hands he pulled him up out of his chair and shook him.

"Why, you deceitful, ungrateful little boy! It would serve you right if I took you back and let you rot there in that pathetic little hole! Ah, but she would like that, wouldn't she? And that is why we are *not* going back. Not now, not ever!"

"But you must!" Atrus cried out, appalled at the thought. "She'll be worried! When she doesn't hear…"

Taking Atrus by the scruff of the neck, Gehn half marched, half dragged him to his room and threw him inside, then slammed the door and locked it.

"Wait!" Atrus cried, picking himself up and throwing himself at the door. "Father! *Please*…you've got to listen!"

§

For three whole days, Gehn did not return. When he finally did, he announced himself by rapping loudly on the door to Atrus's room.

"Atrus?"

Atrus was in his sleeping niche in the big wardrobe, a spot that felt more like his bed at home, reading a D'ni book, a half-eaten apple in one hand. The sudden knocking made him jump. Hiding the apple and the book, he quickly closed the wardrobe door and hurried across to the bed, slipping beneath the silken sheets.

"Atrus?" Gehn's voice came again. Significantly, he spoke D'ni now. "Are you awake? I need to talk with you."

He ought to have told him to go away, but the anger he'd first felt had now evaporated. Besides, he wanted to know just what his father had to say for himself.

"All right…" he called back, feigning indifference.

He heard the key turn in the lock. A moment later Gehn stepped into the room. He looked immensely weary, his pale eyes ringed from lack of sleep, his clothes unwashed—the same clothes he had been wearing the evening he had argued with Atrus.

Atrus sat up, his back against the massive, carved headboard, looking across at Gehn, who was outlined in the half-light by the door.

"I've been thinking," Atrus began.

Gehn raised a hand. "We speak only D'ni henceforth."

Atrus started again, this time in D'ni. "I've been thinking. Trying to see it from your point of view. And I think I understand."

Gehn came closer, intrigued. "And what conclusion did you come to?"

Atrus hesitated, then. "I think I understand why you feel what you feel about Anna. Why you hate her so much."

Gehn laughed, surprised, yet his face was strangely pained. "No, Atrus. I do not *hate* her. It would be easy if it were that simple. But I do *blame* her. I blame her for what she did to D'ni. And for leaving my father here, knowing he would die."

"I don't see the difference."

"No?" Gehn came closer, standing over him. "It is hard to explain just what I feel sometimes. She is my mother and so she *has* to love me. It is her duty. Why, I even saw it in her eyes that last time. But she does not like me. To be honest, she never has." He shook his head, then continued. "It was the same with Veovis. She never liked *him.* She thought him odious; ill-mannered and foul-tempered. Yet when it came down to it, she felt that her duty was to love him—to save him from himself."

Gehn sighed heavily. "She was a hypocrite. She did not act on what she knew to be the truth. It was a weakness that destroyed a race of gods!"

"And yet you two survived," Atrus said quietly. "She saved you. Brought you out of D'ni."

"Yes," Gehn said, staring away into the shadows on the far side of the room. "Some days I wonder why. Some days I ask myself whether that, too, was not weakness of a kind. Whether it would not have been better for us both to have died back there and end it all cleanly. As it is…"

Atrus stared at his father in the long silence that followed, seeing him clearly for the first time. There was something quite admirable about

the spirit within him about the determination to try to restore and recreate the D'ni culture single-handedly. Admirable but futile.

"So can I go and see Anna?"

Gehn did not even look at him. "No, Atrus. My mind is made up. It would be too disruptive, and I cannot afford disruption."

"But she'll worry if I don't go back…"

"Be quiet, boy! I said no, and I mean no! Now let that be the last word on the matter! I shall send Rijus with a note, informing your grandmother that you are well and explaining why she cannot see you again. But beyond that, I can permit no further contact between you."

Atrus looked down. It was as if his father had physically struck him. Not see her again? The thought appalled him.

"As for the matter of your deception," Gehn went on, unaware, it seemed, of the great shadow that had fallen on the young man's spirit, "I have to tell you that I was gravely disappointed in you, Atrus. That said, I shall overlook it this once. Indeed, it may prove a great benefit in the long term. It will certainly save me a great deal of time and hard work, and it will also mean that I can press on more rapidly than I had anticipated. It is possible you might even start a book of your own."

Atrus looked up. "A *book?*"

"Yes, But you must promise me something."

Gehn loomed over him, his manner fierce, uncompromising. "You must promise me never—and I mean *never*—to question my word again or to scheme behind my back. You must be absolutely clear on this, Atrus. I am Master here and my word is law."

Atrus stared at his father, knowing him at that moment better than he had ever known him; then, realizing he had no other choice, he bowed his head.

"I promise."

"Good. Then come and get something to eat. You must be starving."

11

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"Where are we?" Atrus asked, looking about him at the cave into which they had "linked," his eyes taking a moment to adjust to the
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darkness.

Gehn edged past him. Standing on tiptoe, he reached into a narrow recess high up at the back of the cave. “This is one of my more recent worlds,” he answered, removing a slender box. Within was the Linking Book that would get them back to D’ni. Quickly checking that it had not been tampered with, he slid it back into the hole in the rock, then turned, looking to Atrus. “This is my Thirty-seventh Age.”

“Ah…” Atrus said, if only because he could think of nothing else. Personally, he would have spent a little time and effort thinking of a name for the Age—something mystical and romantic, perhaps—but Gehn was pragmatic when it came to his creations.

For three years now he had been accompanying his father to these Ages, and never once had Gehn thought to give an Age a name. Numbers. It was always numbers with his father.

At the front of the cave, a narrow tunnel curved away to the left, sloping steadily upward. Fastening his cloak at the neck, Atrus followed Gehn out, wondering what kind of world this was.

Up above it was night. They emerged into a rough circle of open grass surrounded on three sides by the bare rock of the hillside. Below them, under a dark, blue-black sky in which sat two small moons—one white, one red—lay an island. At the center of the island was an oval lake.

Atrus stood there, taking in the sight, impressed by the circle of low hills that formed a natural bowl about the lake. The lake itself was dark and still, reflecting the twin moons, the surrounding sea shimmeringly bright.

Looking at it, Atrus began to question it, as he always did, wondering what words, what phrases his father had used to get that soft, sculpted shape to the hills? Or was that a product of the underlying rock? Was it limestone? Or clay, perhaps? And those trees, over to the right—were they a natural variant, or had Gehn written them in specifically?

The air was sweet and cool, rich with the varied scents of living things.

“It’s very beautiful,” he said finally, looking to his father, but Gehn merely grunted, surveying his work with what seemed a haughty disregard.

“I have done much better work than this,” he answered, climbing up onto one of the rocks, then stepping down the other side. “In some ways

this is my least successful experiment. I tried to keep it simple. Too simple, possibly."

Atrus climbed up onto the rock, hurrying to catch up. He had seen quite a few of his father's Ages these past three years—he hasn't begun to try making ages yet—but it had never ceased to astonish him that mere words could create such vivid and tangible realities.

There was a path leading down between the scattered rocks. After a dozen paces it opened out onto a bare slope covered in thigh-high grass. Below them, maybe a mile or so distant, huddled around the left-hand side of the lake, was a scatter of low, rectangular buildings, oddly shaped, as if half made of stone; maybe forty in all, lit by the lamps which hung over doorways and on poles along the harbor's edge. Suspended walkways linked the huts. Beneath the eaves of the nearest huts a number of dark, upright figures could be glimpsed.

Atrus turned to stare at Gehn, surprised. "It's *inhabited?*"

"Yes, but don't expect too much, Atrus. The people of this Age are an immensely simple folk. Crude, one might almost say. They manage to eke out a meager existence by way of fishing and basic agriculture, but as for culture, well…"

Gehn's laugh was dismissive. Even so, Atrus felt a strange excitement at the thought of meeting them. Though Gehn had occasionally brought in working parties from one or other of his Ages, he had never taken Atrus to an inhabited Age. Not before today.

They walked on, descending the thickly grassed slope. At first Atrus thought they would come upon the islanders unobserved, but then, a hundred yards or so from the edge of the village, a shout went up. Someone had spotted them. At once there was a buzz of voices down below and signs of sudden, frantic activity.

Gehn touched his arm, motioning that he should stop.

Atrus glanced at his father, alarmed. "Are we in danger?"

Gehn shook his head. "Be patient, Atrus. You are here to observe, so observe."

Atrus fell silent, watching as a dozen or so of the tall, manlike figures came up the slope toward them, carrying flaming torches.

Ten paces from them, the party stopped, dropping to their knees and bowing their heads, abasing themselves before Gehn. One of their number—the tallest of them—stood, then, coming forward, his head

bowed, held out a garland of yellow flowers, offering at the same time a few words of broken D'ni.

"You are welcome, Great Master. Your dwelling is prepared."

In the flickering light of the torches, Atrus saw what he was wearing. It was a crude, handwoven copy of a Guild cloak!

"Good," Gehn said, lowering his head so that the man could place the garland over it. Then, straightening up, he gestured to the man, "Gather the villagers. I shall speak to them at once."

"Master!" the acolyte answered, glancing at Atrus, his dark eyes curious.

"Now lead on!" Gehn said, his voice stern, commanding.

They went down, through a narrow lane flanked by low but spacious huts with steeply sloping roofs of thatch, their wooden walls rising out of a bed of large, shaped boulders. Suspended, slatted wooden walkways swayed gently overhead as they walked through, and as they came out beside the lake, Atrus saw how the earth there had been covered with boards; how steps had been cut into the face of the rock, leading down. Below was a kind of harbor, one wall of which had been created by sinking hundreds of long poles into the bottom of the lake to form a sunken barrier. In the harbor were a dozen or so small but sturdy-looking fishing boats, their masts laid flat, their cloth sails furled.

People were gathering from all over now—men, women, and children. They were pale-skinned, stocky, clearly human in their dark-brown smocks. Their hair was uniformly light in color and spiky, reminding Atrus of straw.

Farther along, a channel had been cut through the rock, linking the lake to the open sea. It was not very broad—barely wide enough for a single boat to navigate—but a strong wooden bridge had been thrown across it.

On the other side, the land began to climb again, and on the top of a narrow ridge, behind which was the more massive slope of the hill, was what looked like a meeting hut of some kind, much larger than the huts that faced the harbor. As they crossed the bridge and began to climb the slope, Atrus saw lights being hastily lit up ahead, garlands hung between the wooden posts at the front of the building.

Behind them, the people of the village gathered, following silently, their torches burning brightly in the moonlit darkness.

Coming to the front of the building, Gehn turned, facing the crowd, whose number had grown to several hundred.

"People of the Thirty-seventh Age," he began, speaking loudly, the circle of hills making his words echo back to him across the lake. "This is my son, Atrus. I have decided that we shall stay with you for a time. While he is here you will treat him with the same respect your accord me."

Atrus stared at his father, surprised. This was the first he had heard of any of this. But Gehn spoke on, his voice booming now.

"Whatever he wants, you will give to him. Whatever he asks, you will do. Is it understood?"

"It is understood," two hundred voices answered as one.

"Good!" Gehn said, then raised his left hand imperiously, dismissing them. He turned to Atrus.

"Come, Atrus. Inside."

Atrus hesitated, looking back down the slope at the dispersing villagers, then, pulling his cloak about him, followed his father into the great hut.

The interior of the hut was shockingly familiar. It was just like the Worship Rooms he had seen in several of the great houses back in D'ni. Symbolic tapestries hung on three of the walls: elaborate and colorful silks which, Atrus guessed, had been taken from D'ni and brought here. There were rugs and screens and, on a low table to the right, a number of golden goblets and bowls—big, jewel-encrusted things that, once again, looked to have been taken from D'ni. Dominating the room, however, was a huge, wooden desk, like the desk in Gehn's study.

He looked to his father. Gehn was watching him, amused.

"You want to know why I brought you here?"

Atrus hesitated, then nodded.

Gehn walked over to the desk and took his seat, then leaned across, taking a long, thin book from a pile to the side.

"The truth is, Atrus, I brought you here for a number of reasons, but mainly so that I might answer a few of those questions you are forever asking me concerning the making of an Age. I wanted to flesh out your theoretical knowledge. To that end, you will keep a notebook while you are here; in it you will write down all your observations about this Age."

He held the book out, letting Atrus take it.

“I also wanted you to experience things for yourself, without preconceptions. I wanted you to see, with your own eyes, the awe in which we are held in the Ages.”

“Awe, father?”

“Yes, Atrus, awe. And so they should, for are we not gods? Do they not owe their lives, their very breath, to us? Would they be *here* had I not written on the whiteness of the page?”

Gehn paused, then. “I want you to stay here a while and observe this Age, to see just what is possible. It will help you with your own writing. You will stay with one of the locals—an old woman whose husband died some years back. You will be courteous to her but aloof, you understand?”

“I understand.”

Gehn sat back. “Good. Then go now. My acolyte is just outside. He will take you to where you will be staying.”

§

The acolyte walked silently before Atrus, his ceremonial torch, its shaft carved with tiny D’ni symbols, held up before him. Curious villagers knelt and bowed their heads as they passed, a low whisper going from one to another in their wake.

When they came to the path through the village, however, the man did not go straight on toward the cave, but turned to the left, climbing a narrow set of steps between two huts that climbed up past their steeply sloping roofs. Atrus followed, coming out above the village on a path that seemed to lead nowhere. Ahead of them was only the dark, moonlit slope of the hill.

The man led up, walking slowly, solemnly, as if at the head of a great procession.

Atrus looked back toward the harbor, his eyes finding the bridge and, beyond it in the darkness, the meeting hut. Beyond that, visible only now that the lanterns had been lit inside, was a long, low tent. As Atrus watched, he saw his father walk across and duck beneath the canvas flap.

He turned back. Ahead of him, to his left, just over the hump of the hill, there was a hint of light. As they climbed, it grew, revealing the

outline of a hut just over the brow of the slope. The light was from its open doorway.

As they drew nearer, a figure stepped into the light—outlined for one brief moment before it merged with the darkness.

The old woman.

As the light from the acolyte's torch fell over the front of the hut, she was revealed. Like most of her people, she wore a simple, dark-brown smock of coarsely woven cloth. Her hair, likewise, was unsophisticated, its thick gray strands framing her deeply lined face in an unkempt halo. She was the oldest person Atrus had ever seen.

She looked away, bowing awkwardly, then stepped back, allowing him to enter the hut.

Atrus hesitated, then ducked under the low lintel, into a clean, warm space that was filled with the strong, fresh scent of herbs. Looking about him, he saw them at once, all along the right-hand wall, above two narrow shelves of pots and pans: sprig after sprig of herbs, hung on tiny wooden hooks.

The floor was covered in planed wooden boards, the low roof made of rafter and thatch. Halfway down its length, a plain blue curtain cut off his view of the rest of the hut.

"You want to eat?" the old woman asked, uncomfortable in his presence, her D'ni even more rudimentary than the acolyte's.

Atrus shook his head. "Thank you, I'm not really hungry."

"Ah…" Her nod seemed more from nervousness than agreement. She looked at him anxiously, her brown eyes never leaving his face. "You want to sleep?"

"I…" The truth was, he wasn't really tired. After all, back in D'ni it was barely suppertime. Yet he could sense how awkward he was making her feel and felt awkward himself for doing so. "Yes," he said, after a moment. "If you would show me my bed."

There was a slight movement in her face which he didn't understand. She seemed…*regretful?* Then, with a tiny shrug, she went across and, pulling the curtain aside a little way, looked back at him, pointing to what seemed a kind of stall.

He went across and looked, then laughed; a pleasant laugh of surprise, for there, between the thin wooden walls of his sleeping stall lay a simple, straw-stuffed mattress.

“Like home,” he said quietly.

The old woman was staring at him, curious now. “Beg pardon, Master?”

He looked to her, realizing his eyes were moist. “When I was a child, with my grandmother, I had a mattress similar to this.”

“Is it no good?” she asked, as if he had been speaking a foreign language.

“No, no…it’s…wonderful.” He looked to her and smiled, strangely grateful to her. Then, on impulse, remembering the pleasure his grandmother had always got from feeding him, he said, “Can I change my mind? I mean, about the food?”

“Of course!” the old woman said, a smile lighting her face for the first time. “I bring you soup and bread, yes?”

He grinned. “It sounds marvelous!”

“Then you wait, Master. I bring you some.”

Atrus watched her go, then looked about him, suddenly at ease, breathing in the pleasant scent of the herbs.

He knelt, setting his knapsack and the notebook down in a corner of the stall, then removed his cloak and stowed it in the sack. As he straightened up again, the old woman returned, carrying a wooden tray. On it was an earthenware bowl of soup, a wooden spoon, and half a small loaf of brown bread. Atrus accepted it gratefully, then sat, the tray in his lap. Smiling at her, he broke off a hunk of the bread and dipped it into the bowl.

For a while he ate in silence, enjoying that simple meal. Finished, he looked up at the old woman.

“Was it okay?” she asked, a look of deep concern on her heavily lined face.

Atrus grinned. “It was *wonderful!* The best I’ve *ever* tasted!”

The truth was, he had no idea what it had been, but what he’d said wasn’t a lie. It had been wonderful. The best soup he had *ever* tasted, Anna’s notwithstanding.

His words brought a ray of spring sunlight to the old woman’s face. “You want more?”

“*Can* I?”

It was as if, with those two little words, he had offered her all the riches of D’ni. She beamed, then hurried away, returning in a moment with

a second bowl and the other half of the loaf.

"There," she said, standing over him as he ate, grinning broadly. "You growing boy! You need your food, eh?"

§

Atrus woke in the darkness before dawn, wondering for an instant where he was, the scent of herbs in the tiny, enclosed space oddly disturbing.

He sat up, listening to the silence, then stood, making his way quickly, quietly outside.

Both moons had set and the land was dark now, intensely dark, the sky almost bright by comparison, like the desert sky at night. Yet looking up he knew he was not on earth. Where was the Hunter now? Where the Dipper? Were they elsewhere in that vast, star-dusted sky, or was he somewhere else entirely? In another universe, perhaps?

The thought was one he had had more and more often these past few months. A dangerous, unspoken thought.

And yet the more I discover about Writing, the more I challenge my father's view that we are creating the worlds we travel in.

What if they weren't so much making those worlds as linking to pre-existing possibilities?

At first he had dismissed the notion as a foolish one. Of course they created these worlds. They had to be! How else would they come into being in such precise and predictable forms? Besides, it was simply not possible that an infinite supply of different worlds existed out there, waiting to be tapped. Yet the more he'd thought about it, the more he had come to question his father's simpler explanation.

He walked down the slope until he came to a slab of rock overlooking the lake. There he bent down, squatting on his haunches, looking out across the dark bowl of the lake.

Now that the moons had almost set, it was close to impossible to distinguish where the lake ended and the land began. It was like peering into the volcano on a moonless night. You could see nothing, but you might imagine everything. That was the thing about darkness—the way it refused to remain a simple *absence*. Unlike snow, which he had seen on

one of Gehn's other Ages, the darkness took on forms—thousands of forms—for the dark was both fluid and potent.

Behind him, over the crest of the hill, the day was making an appearance. Slowly, very slowly, light bled into the bowl, etching sharp-edged shadows on the hillside facing him. Atrus watched it, fascinated, then turned, squinting against the bright arc that peeped above the curve of the hill.

Turning back, he noticed something just below him on the edge of the lake.

At first he thought it was some kind of sea creature—a seal, perhaps—but then, as it straightened up, he saw it clearly, silhouetted in the half light.

A girl. It was a girl.

As he watched, she bent down again, making a series of little bobbing motions. He frowned, puzzled. What in Kerath's name was she doing? Then, with a little jolt, he understood. Washing! She was washing! That little mound beside her was a basket full of sodden clothes!

He laughed, and as he did, he saw her tense and look around, like a startled animal.

Gathering up her basket she scurried up the hillside, disappearing over the dark hump of the hill, her tiny figure briefly outlined against the arc of the sun. Atrus watched, astonished by her reaction, then stood. The sun was half risen now. In its light he could see the thatched roof of the hut, dark shape embedded in the deeper darkness of the slope.

Atrus turned, making a slow circle, his arms outstretched as he breathed in the rich, clear air. Then, determined to make an early start, he hurried up the slope, making for the hut.

12

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"Young Master?"

Atrus turned onto his side, wondering for an instant where he was. Herbs. The smell of herbs. Ah, yes. The old woman's hut. He was on the Thirty-seventh Age of Gehn, and it was morning.

He sat up, rubbing his eyes, then looked to the old woman, who stood with her back half bent in the opening to the stall.
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“Forgive me, young Master,” she said breathlessly, “but the Lord Gehn wants to see you at once.”

Nodding his thanks, he stood and stretched. What time was it? And how long had he slept? He seemed to sleep longer, deeper, while he was here. Maybe it had something to do with the air.

He yawned, then, knowing how his father hated to be kept waiting, went outside.

Pulling on his glasses, he studied the scene that met his eyes.

Beneath him the slope was a tawny brown, furred like an animal’s back. Beyond it the folds of land that surrounded the lake were revealed in browns and greens—so many different shades that he caught his breath to think of such subtle variation. And the textures! He walked out slowly, onto the ridge. Tall, dark trees, their crowns explosions of jet black leaves, covered the left flank of the nearest hill, ending abruptly in a smooth covering of bright green grass. Atrus laughed.

“Why do you laugh, Master?”

Atrus turned, facing the acolyte, the smile gone from his face. He had sot seen him when he’d stepped out.

“I laughed because of that hill there. It reminded me…well, of a half-shaven head. The way those trees end in a straight line…”

The priest stepped up and looked, then nodded; but there was not the slightest trace of amusement in his expression. He looked back at Atrus, then, with a bow, said, “Your father awaits you, Master.”

Atrus sighed inwardly. It was his fourth day on the island and still the man retained his distance.

He walked slowly down the slope, silent now and thoughtful, looking about him at the swell and fold of hills surrounding the lake. As the village came into sight, he stared at it a while, then looked to the acolyte.

“What is your name?”

“My *name?*” The man seemed strangely intimidated by the query.

“Yes, your name. What is it?”

“My name is…One.”

“One?” Atrus gave a small laugh. “You mean, the number one?”

The man nodded, unable to meet Atrus’s eyes.

“And was that always your name?”

He hesitated, then shook his head. “My birth name was Koena.”

“Koena,” Atrus said, walking on, his eyes taking in the pleasant shapes of the thatched roofs just below him now, the covered walkways, the delightful contrast of the lake’s vivid blue against the bright greens and russets of the land sloping down to it. “But One is the name my father gave you?”

Koena nodded.

A faint smile appeared at the corners of Atrus’s mouth. Of course. He should have known. He turned his head, studying the man a moment, not disliking his long, rather severe features, noting in the unforgiving daylight just how coarse the cloth of his cloak actually was, how crudely fashioned the symbols on it.

“Have you been my father’s helper long?”

“A thousand days.”

Then this Age was indeed “recent.” Gehn had created it only a matter of three years ago at most. But what about before that? Had it existed in any form at all? Did these people have any memories of a time before the Lord Gehn had come among them? And if they did, were those memories true memories, or were they also *written in?*

He knew from his studies that you could not actually *write* such things: not directly, anyway. Yet when you created an Age, with all of its complexities, then a great shadow of cause and effect was thrown back, such that the Age, though new created, still had a “history” of a kind. Not a real history, of course. How could it have a real history, after all? But in the minds and memories of its inhabitants it would seem as if it had. To them, the past would seem as real as it did to him or Gehn.

Or so Gehn argued. For himself he was no longer quite so sure.

A strange, high-pitched cry from somewhere to his left made Atrus start, then turn to look for its source. There was a strange flapping noise in the air, then a shadow whisked past his feet. He looked up in time to see a strange, plump-bodied animal shoot past, swimming, it seemed, through he air.

Koena was staring at him, astonished. “Master?” he asked. “Are you all right?”

“That!” Atrus said, pointing after it. “That…*animal*…what is it?”

“*That?* That is a bird, Master.”

Atrus stared openmouthed, watching the “bird” circle over the lake, the flapping noise coming from the long arms it used to pull itself

through the air. He watched it swoop, then dive.

"Amazing!" Atrus said. "I've never seen its like!"

Koena was staring at him now.

Atrus shook his head. In the other Ages there had been many birds, but never anything like this. This was simply bizarre. It was more like a small rodent than a bird and seemed far too heavy to fly, and those strange, furred wings.

What did he write? He wondered. Why would Gehn create such a creature? Or had he? What if this wasn't deliberate? What if it was an accident?

Atrus turned, looking to Koena.

"Come," he said, intrigued by the thought that his father might purposefully have created such a creature. "Let's go down. My father will be angry if he is kept waiting."

§

Gehn, who was finishing his breakfast, sat at a table covered in a thick red cloth edged with golden tassels. He was eating from a golden bowl, a golden goblet at his side. Behind him, on a stand, was a silk pennant, the D'ni symbol of the book emblazoned in black on its pure white background. Atrus stepped into the tent, looking about him, noting the luxuries that were on display on every side. In the far corner of the tent was a massive wooden bed, the headboard clearly of local design. Beside it was a D'ni dressing screen, painted gold and blue and carmine.

He stepped forward. "You sent for me, father?"

"Ah, Atrus…" Gehn said, wiping his mouth with a silken cloth, then threw it aside. "I thought we should continue with your lessons, Atrus."

"Father?"

Gehn nodded, then took his arm and led him across to a low table in the corner on which a large-scale map of the island had been spread out.

Atrus stretched out a hand and touched the bottom left-hand corner with his index finger. "Where's that?"

"Gone," Gehn said, looking at him strangely.

"And that?" he said, noting another, smaller island just beyond the sea passage.

“Gone.”

Atrus looked to his father and frowned. “How?”

Gehn shrugged.

“I…” Atrus shook his head. “Is this what you want me to look for? Things disappearing?”

“No, Atrus. I want you simply to observe.”

Atrus stared at his father a moment, then looked back at the map. As far as he could see everything else was precisely as he recalled it from his preliminary journeys around the island, down to the smallest detail.

Gehn went across to his desk and, opening the leather case he had brought with him from D’ni this time, took a slender notebook from inside and handed it to Atrus. “Here.”

Atrus opened it and scanned a few lines, then looked back at his father. “What are these?”

“What you have there are a number of random phrases from the Age Thirty-seven book. What I want you to do, Atrus, is to try to ascertain what aspects of this Age they relate to, and how and why they create the effects they do.”

“You want me to analyze them?”

“No, Atrus. But I do want you to begin to grip the relationship between the words that are written on the page and the complex entity—the physical, living Age—that results. You see, while our Art *is* a precise one, its effects are often quite surprising, owing to the complexity of the web of relationships that are created between things. The meaning of an individual phrase can be altered by the addition of other phrases, often to the extent that the original description bears no relation whatsoever to the resultant reality. That is why the D’ni were so adamant about contradictions. Contradictions can destroy an Age. Too often they simply make it break apart under the strain of trying to resolve the conflicting instructions.”

Atrus nodded. “Yet if what you say is true, how can I tell if what I am observing relates directly to the phrases in this book? What if other phrases have distorted the end result?”

“That is for you to discover.”

“But if I have only these few phrases…”

Gehn stared at him, then raised an eyebrow, as if to indicate that he ought to be able to work that one out for himself.

“You mean, you want me to guess?”

“No guess, Atrus. Speculate. I want you to try to unravel the puzzle of this world. To look back from the world to the words and attempt to understand exactly why certain things resulted. It is, you will come to see, every bit as important as learning the D’ni words and phrases that purport to describe these things. Indeed, much of my experimenting over the years has been along these very lines. I have learned a great deal from my observations, Atrus, and so will you.”

“Father.”

“Then go now. And take the map, if you wish. I have no further need of it.”

§

Atrus sat in the long meadow above the lake, the folded map in his lap, his father’s notebook open at his side. Surrounded by the thigh-high grass he could not be seen, unless by someone working on the slopes on the far side of the lake, but right now it was midday and the villagers were in their huts, eating.

He had begun with the simplest of the twenty phrases his father had copied out for him—one which related to the composition of the soil here. From his own studies he knew how important the underlying rock and soil was to the kind of Age that resulted, especially the soil. A good rich soil, full of nutrients and minerals, would produce good harvests, which in turn would allow the people of that Age to spend less time carrying out the backbreaking task of cultivation. That was crucially important, for a people who did not have to spend every daylight hour providing food for their tables was a people that would quickly develop a culture. For culture, Atrus understood, was a product of excess.

Yes, he thought, recalling his days in the cleft. He understood it now. Had Anna been born and raised in the cleft, they would not have survived. Had she been simply a cultivator and no more, they would never have had enough, for there had never been enough growing space, enough seeds, enough water—enough of *anything*—to allow them to survive. What there *had* been was Anna’s talent as a painter and a sculptor. It was that, ironically, which had kept them alive: that had provided them with the salt they needed, the seeds and flour and fuel, yes, and all of those tiny

luxuries that had made life there bearable. Without them they would have died.

As it was, he had grown beyond the expectations of such a dry, uninhabitable place. The rich soil of Anna's mind had nurtured him, bringing him to ripeness.

Only now did he understand that. After years of blaming her, he saw it clearly once again.

The soil. It was all down to the soil. Growth began not in the sunlight but in the darkness, in tiny cracks, deep down in the earth.

Atrus smiled, then looked to the side, reading the D'ni phrase again. By rights, the soil here ought to have been rich and fertile, yet from his own observations he saw that other factors had affected it somehow. There was a slight acidity to it that was unhealthy.

He frowned, wishing that his father had given him the whole book to read and not just random phrases. Yet he knew how protective his father was of his books.

He was about to lay back and think the problem through, when he heard a tiny cry from somewhere just behind him. Setting the map aside, Atrus stood, looking about him at the meadow.

Nothing. At least nothing he could see. He took a few paces, then frowned. He couldn't have imagined it, surely?

It came again, this time a clear cry for help.

He ran toward the sound, then stopped, astonished. Just ahead of him the thick grass ended in a narrow chasm about six feet across and twelve or fifteen long—a chasm that had not been there the last time he had looked.

He stepped up to its edge, careful not to fall, and peered down into its darkness. It was the girl—the one he'd seen that first morning. She had fallen in and now seemed stuck up to her knees in the dark earth at the bottom of the crack some eight or ten feet down.

"It's okay," he said. "Don't worry. I'll get you out."

He turned, looking about him. He needed a rope or a branch or something. Anything he could throw down to her, then haul her up. Yet even as he stood there, thinking about it, he heard the soft fall of earth and, looking back, saw how it had fallen over her, making her position worse.

The edge of the nearest copse was fifty yards away. By the time he got there, broke off a branch and came back, she might quite easily he

buried under it.

There was only one way.

He sat down on the edge, then, testing that it would take his weight, turned, and began to lower himself down into the crack, searching the face of it for footholds as he went.

“Reach up!” he called to her. “Reach up and take hold of my right foot.”

He felt something brush the tip of his boot. Too high. He was still too high. The earth he was clinging to didn’t feel all that secure, but he could not abandon her. He moved down a fraction more and felt, as he did, her hand close about his ankle.

“Good!” he said, thankful that she was only a waif of a girl. “Now get a grip with your other hand.”

Two second passed, and then he felt her other hand grip his ankle.

“Okay. Now hold on tight. And don’t struggle. If you struggle, we’ll both fall in again!”

Slowly, painfully slowly, he hauled himself up and over the edge, turning at the end, to reach down and grab her wrists, pulling her up the last few feet.

She sat there, beside him on the grass, trembling, her chest rising and falling as she tried to get her breath, her frightened eyes staring at the black wound in the earth that had almost claimed her.

“Are you okay?” he asked, after a moment.

She went to nod, then shook her head.

He stared at her a moment, then, standing, went back across to where he’d left the map and notebook, and, picking up his cloak, took it back and wrapped it about her shoulders.

She looked to him, grateful, then stared back at the crack. “What is it?” she asked, her voice a whisper.

“I don’t know,” he answered, troubled suddenly, remembering the missing islands on the map. *But perhaps my father does.*

§

Gehn reached across the desk and drew the case toward him, then, taking the tiny key from the chain about his neck, unlocked the clasps.

“I shall be gone only a few hours,” he said, glancing up at Atrus, who stood on the other side of the desk, the girl beside him. “She will remain here with the acolyte until I return. And you shall say nothing. You understand, Atrus? I do not want the islanders panicked by this. There is a simple explanation and I shall find it.”

Atrus bowed his head.

“Good.” Gehn nodded decisively, then began to pack away all of his books and papers.

“Father?”

“Yes, Atrus?”

“I had planned to go out to the fishing grounds this afternoon. I’d made arrangements with one of the fishermen. Should I cancel that now?”

Gehn paused, considering, then, “No. You had best carry on as though nothing has happened. But try not to be out too long. I shall have need of you when I return.”

“Of course, father.”

“Good. Now go and fetch the acolyte.” He looked to the girl. “You…take a seat in the corner there. And take that cloak off. Only those of D’ni blood should wear such a cloak!”

§

Once his father had gone, Atrus went directly to the harbor. The boat he was to go out on was owned by an old fisherman named Tarkuk, a wizened little man with strangely long fingers. His son, Birili, was a short, heavily muscled young man of few words. He gave Atrus a single glance as he stepped on board; thereafter he barely acknowledged him.

They sailed out through the sea channel into the open sea.

Out there, unprotected by the bowl of hills, a breeze blew across the water’s surface, making the boat rise and fall on the choppy surface. As Tarkuk watched from the stern, one long, sun-browned hand on the tiller, a small clay pipe clenched between his small yellow teeth, Birili raised the mast and unfurled the sail.

Atrus watched, fascinated as the square of cloth caught the wind and seemed to swell, tugging against the restraining rope in Birili’s hand. As the boat swung around it slowly gathered speed, gently rising and falling as they made their way around the curve of the island.

He leaned out, looking down through the clear, almost translucent water. The seabed was still visible this close to the island, flat and cluttered, the odd tangle of weeds giving it the appearance of scrubland.

Somewhere around here there had been a second tiny island. Nothing large, but significant enough to have been marked on Gehn's original map. Now there was nothing.

So what did that mean? What was happening here on the Thirty-seventh Age?

He sniffed the air, conscious of its strong salinity. The lake, too, he'd been told, was salty. The villagers got their water from springs in the surrounding hills and from a single well just behind Gehn's tent.

Or did, when he wasn't in residence.

Behind him the island, which still dominated the skyline, was slowly receding. He turned, looking out past Birili and the billowing sail. The sea stretched out into the distance. There, where the horizon ought to be, it seemed hazed.

"What's that?" he asked, pointing toward it.

"What's what?" Tarkuk asked, leaning forward, trying to see past the sail, as if something was actually on the water itself.

"That mist…"

The old man stared a moment, then turned his head and spat over the edge of the boat.

"It is the mist. It is where the sea ends."

Atrus frowned. "But surely there's something out there, beyond the mist?"

But Tarkuk merely looked away.

Atrus looked back. Now that they were closer, he could see that the mist was like a solid barrier, forming a curving wall about the island.

Strange, he thought. It's as if it all really does end there.

As they came farther around the curve of the island, other boats came into sight, anchored a mile or so out from the land—seven of them in all, forming a huge elliptic on the open water, gently rocking in the warm, pleasant breeze.

They joined the others, lowering the sail, anchoring at what was clearly Tarkuk's position in that flattened circle.

Each in his place, Atrus thought, conscious of how docile, how amenable these people were.

The old man turned back, a coil of fine-meshed net between his hands. “Would you like to fish, Master?”

“No. I’ll watch, thanks.”

With a nod to his son, Tarkuk turned and, with a strange, looping motion, cast his net out onto the surface of the sea, keeping only the knotted end of a guide string in his hand. Slowly the net drifted to the right, forming a great figure eight in the water. As the string grew taut, he began to haul it in. As he did, Birili cast his own net from the other side of the boat, his stance, his movements so like his father’s that Atrus gave a little laugh of recognition.

The old man had hauled the net over to the side of the boat. Now he leaned over and, with a quick little movement of the wrist, began to loop the net up out of the water and onto the deck.

Atrus sat forward, his eyes wide. The dull brown mesh of the net glistened now with shimmering, wriggling silver. Hundreds and hundreds of tiny silver fish, none longer than his hand, now filled the net. As Tarkuk threw the last coil of the net onto the deck, so Birili, on the other side of the boat, began to draw his in.

So simple, Atrus thought, watching Tarkuk take one of the big rectangular woven baskets from near the bow and, crouching, begin to pluck fish from the net and throw them into it.

Careful not to get in his way and mindful of the gentle sway of the boat, Atrus stepped across and, kneeling, looked into the basket. It was like looking into a chest of silver—only this silver was alive.

Reaching out, he closed his hand about one of the wriggling shapes and tried to pick it up, and found he was holding nothing. The fish had slipped from his grasp.

Atrus raised his fingers to his nose and sniffed, frowning at the unfamiliar smell, then rubbed his thumb across his fingertips. He had not known they would be so slippery, so slick with oil.

Tarkuk had stopped and was watching him, a deep curiosity in his eyes. Atrus met those eyes and smiled, but the old man was not to be reached so easily. He made a small motion at the corner of his mouth, then looked down, getting on with his work again.

He looked to Tarkuk. “It looks like there are enough fish here in this boat to feed the whole village!”

“You think so?” The old man shrugged. “Once you’ve lopped off the head and taken the bones and skin into consideration, there’s not much meat on a single fish. It would take several dozen of them to make a half-decent meal. Besides, we use them for other things, too. For their fat, mainly. We make oil from it, for our lamps.”

Atrus nodded. “And your clothes?”

“Those are made of linen.”

“Linen?”

“There is a plant. It grows on the island. We harvest it and dry it and then weave it into cloth.”

He had seen it but not known what it was. And in his head, Atrus put another piece of the puzzle into place. Fish that had an oily fat for fuel. A plant that could be woven into clothes. Such things, when written in, would allow human life to thrive in a place like this.

He felt a tinge of admiration for Gehn. It was simple, certainly, but clever. Very clever.

“Can we go out farther?”

“Farther?” The old man seemed puzzled by the question.

“Yes…out there, where the mist is.”

Tarkuk stared at him, his face hard, his whole manner suddenly very different. “Why?”

“Because I’d like to see it,” Atrus said, for the first time slightly irritated by the old man’s response.

Birili, he noted, had stopped hauling in his net and had turned to stare at him.

“The currents are too strong out there,” Tarkuk said, as if that settled the matter.

“Nonsense,” Atrus said, knowing suddenly what it was. They were afraid of the mist. They had a superstitious fear of it.

He watched as Tarkuk and his son tersely finished gathering in their nets. Then, when the baskets were fastened and the nets furled beneath the bow seat, a stony-faced Birili hauled up the anchor, then, hoisting the sail again, held the rope taut as the canvas filled.

As they moved out between the boats, Atrus noted the startled looks on the faces of the other fishermen.

Ignoring Tarkuk’s piercing look, he went to the side and trailed his hand briefly in the water, noting how warm it was. The breeze had

dropped, but the water was still choppy. Indeed, it seemed to get choppier the farther they sailed from the island.

Ahead, the wall of mist came closer and closer.

Again he let his hand trail lightly in the water, then jerked it back, surprised.

Cold…the water was freezing cold!

Atrus stared down into the water. Out here the water was dark. One could not see where it ended—*if* it ended—beneath them. He had the sudden, gut-wrenching feeling that they had sailed out over some kind of shelf and that beneath them was a mile or more of water.

Ridiculous, he thought, then turned, looking to where Birili stood, the rope slack in his hand.

He looked to the sail, then frowned. The wind had dropped completely. By rights they ought to be slowing, but the boat was traveling faster than ever.

The currents, he thought, beginning to understand. He turned, looking to the old man. Both he and his son had their eyes closed now, and were kneeling in the bottom of the boat, as if in prayer. As for the boat, that was sailing itself now, in the grip of something that was drawing it along at a clipping pace.

Slowly the wall of mist approached, filling the sky in front of them. It was cold now, bitterly cold, and as they raced along, the water beneath them seemed to boil and bubble. Then, suddenly, they were alongside that great wall of whiteness, flying along on the surface parallel to it.

Atrus reached across and took the old man's arm. "Tarkuk! Listen to me! We have to do something!"

Tarkuk opened his eyes and stared at Atrus as if he didn't recognize him. "*Do* something?"

"Yes!" Atrus yelled. He looked around, then spied the oars that lay in the bottom of the boat. "Come on! If we all row then we might pull free!"

Tarkuk shook his head slowly, but Atrus would not let him lapse back into his fear. Gripping his shoulders now, he shook him hard.

"Come on! I command you! Now row!"

Coming to himself, Tarkuk met Atrus's eyes and bowed his head. "As my Master commands."

Tarkuk stood unsteadily, then, raising his voice, barked orders at his son. At first Birili seemed reluctant, as if he had already consigned himself, body and soul, to the deep. Then, like a sleepwalker waking, he took up his oar and sat.

"Here," Atrus said, sitting beside him. "Let me help."

He had sculled his father's boat often enough in the past to know how to row, and he knew they would get nowhere unless they all pulled together.

"Come on!" he called, encouraging them now. "Row if you want to live!"

They heaved and heaved, fighting the current, struggling to turn the boat back toward the island. For a while it seemed that the current was too strong and that all their efforts were about to end in vain, but then, suddenly, they began to pull away.

Sinews straining, they hauled their way, inch by inch across the dark surface of the water, that massive wall of whiteness receding slowly at their back, until, breathless from the effort, they relaxed, staring back the way they had come.

Atrus stretched his neck and looked up, straight into the sky. He ached. Every muscle in his body ached, yet he felt a great surge of triumph.

"Well done!" he said, looking about him and laughing. But Tarkuk and his son were looking down, silent—strangely, eerily silent.

"What is it?" he asked after a moment, touching the old man's arm. At the touch, Tarkuk jerked away.

Atrus blinked. What was going on here? What had he missed? He had made a mistake, true, but they had survived, hadn't they? Why, he had forced them to survive! He had made them row when they had given up.

He reached out, shaking the old man by the arm. "What is it? Answer me! I have to know!"

Tarkuk glanced at him, then dropped his eyes again. "We have cheated the Whiteness."

"Cheated…?" Atrus laughed, astonished. "What do you mean?"

But the old man would say no more. Slowly Birili got to his feet and, adjusting the sail, turned the boat back toward the island.

In silence they sailed back.

As they climbed from the boat and mounted the steps, Atrus made to speak to Tarkuk again, but the old man seemed reluctant even to acknowledge him now.

Atrus shook his head, perplexed. What had happened out there? Just what exactly had he missed?

He didn't know. But he would. He would make it his business to find out, before his father returned.

§

Atrus hurried across the bridge, conscious of the gathering clouds overhead, then ran up the slope toward his father's tent.

Surprised by his sudden entrance, Koena got up hurriedly, making a little bowing motion, still uncertain quite how to behave toward Gehn's son. "Young Master? Is everything all right?"

The girl was sitting on the ground nearby, staring up at Atrus.

"No," Atrus answered, walking past Koena and sitting in his father's chair.

"Master?" Koena came across and stood before him. "Are there more cracks?"

"No. But there is something I want an explanation for."

"Master?"

Atrus hesitated, then. "Something happened."

"Something?"

"Yes, when I was out on the boat. The old man said something about cheating the Whiteness."

Loena gasped. "You have been out there?"

"Out *where?*" Atrus said, knowing where he meant, but wanting to hear it from his lips.

"To the Mist Wall."

Atrus nodded. "We sailed the dark current. And then we rowed back."

Koena's mouth had fallen open. "No," he said quietly.

"What is it?" Atrus asked. "What am I missing? What don't I understand?"

Koena hesitated, his eyes pleading with Atrus now.

“Tell me,” Atrus insisted, “or I shall have my father wring it from you!”

The man sighed, then answered him, speaking reluctantly. “The Whiteness…it was our Master. Before your father came.”

He fell silent. There was a rumble of distant thunder.

Atrus, too, was silent for a time, taking in this new piece of information, then he looked to Koena again. “And my father knows nothing of this?”

“Nothing.”

“The old man and his son…what will happen to them?”

Koena looked down. It was clear he did not want to say another word, but Atrus needed to know.

“Please. You have to tell me. It’s very important.”

The man shrugged, then: “They will die. Just as surely as if you had left them out there.”

Atrus shook his head. Now that he understood it he felt a kind of dull anger at the superstitious nonsense that could dream up such a thing. He stood, his anger giving him strength, making him see clearly what he had to do.

“Listen,” he said, assuming the manner of his father. “Go and fetch the villagers. Tell them to gather outside my father’s hut. It is time I talked to them.”

§

The sky was darkening as Atrus mounted the steps of the meeting hut and turned to face the waiting crowd. A light rain fell. Everyone was there; every last man, woman, and child on the island, Tarkuk and Birili excepted. Atrus swallowed nervously, then, raising his hands the way he’d seen his father do, began to speak, trying to make his voice—not so powerful or deep as his father’s—boom in the same sonorous way.

“This afternoon we went out to the Mist Wall. We sailed the dark current and came back…”

There was a strong murmur of discontent at that. People looked to each other, deeply troubled.

“I have heard talk that we have somehow *cheated* the Whiteness, and it is for that reason that I have summoned you here.”

He paused, looking about him, hoping that what he was about to say next would not prove too difficult for his father.

"I understand your fears," he went on, "but I am proof that the Power of the Whiteness is waning. For did I not sail to the Mist Wall and return? Did the Whiteness take me? No. Nor shall it. In fact, when my father, the Lord Gehn, returns, he and I shall go out beyond the Mist Wall."

There was a gasp at that—a great gasp of disbelief and shock.

"It cannot be done," Loena said, speaking for all gathered there.

"You disbelieve?" Atrus asked, stepping down and confronting his father's man.

Koena fell silent, his head bowed. Overhead there was the faintest rumble of thunder. Great clouds had gathered, throwing the bowl of hills into an intense shadow.

Atrus glanced up at the ominous sky, then spoke again. "All will be well," he said.

There was a great thunderclap. Lightning leapt between the clouds overhead, discharging itself in a vivid blue-white bolt on the crest of the hill facing them. Atrus stared at its afterimage in wonder, then looked about him, seeing how everyone else had fallen to the ground in terror.

"It's nothing," Atrus said, lifting his voice above the now-persistent grumble. "Only a thunderstorm!!"

There was a second, blinding flash and one of the trees on the far side of the lake was struck, blossoming in a great sheet of sudden flame.

"The Whiteness is angry," someone cried from just below him. "See how it searches for you!"

Atrus turned, angry now, knowing he must squash this at once. "Nonsense!" he cried. "It's only the storm!"

But no one was listening. The islanders were pulling at their hair and wailing, as if something horrible was about to descend among them.

Then, as a third lightning bolt ionized the air, sending its tendrils of static hissing through the rainfilled darkness as it sought the earth, Atrus saw, in the brilliant flash, the figure of his father, striding down the path between the huts, heading for the bridge.

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Atrus stood, head bowed before his father in his tent as the rain hammered down on the canvas overhead. The terrified islanders had fled back to their huts while the storm raged, but Gehn was in no mood to placate or reassure them. Right now he was sitting forward in his chair, glaring at his son, his hands gripping the edge of his desk tightly.

"There was trouble, you say. What brought that on?"

"I wanted to see the Mist Wall. I sailed out to it."

"And you found the dark current?"

Atrus looked up, surprised that his father knew of that. He nodded, then proceeded to tell his father all that had transpired in his absence. When he'd finished, Gehn stared at him thoughtfully, then, loosening his grip, sat back.

"It is unfortunate, but it seems that the experiment here has failed. This world is unstable."

"In what way?"

"The island is on a kind of pedestal. A massive pedestal of rock reaching up from the ocean floor. Surrounding it there is an ocean—a deep, intensely cold ocean."

Atrus frowned. "But the water here is warm. And there's fresh water in the lake."

"That comes up from the crust, far below the surface. There is geothermal warming. That same warming creates the Mist Wall. It is where the hot water from below meets and reacts with the cold oceanic currents." Gehn nodded thoughtfully. "As you can imagine, this really is an island, in every possible sense. It is as cut off as a community can be and yet survive."

"But now it's going wrong."

"Precisely. Slowly but surely, this Age is deteriorating. I cannot make out why, but it is. I have tried my utmost to find solutions, yet without a radical rewriting of this Age, I fear it is fated to deteriorate still further."

"And the cracks, father? What causes those?"

Gehn shook his head.

"It must be some fault in the underlying structure. Perhaps the same fault that made the two tiny islands subside."

"Can you fix it?"

Gehn looked to him. “No doubt I could, but I am inclined to leave it. After all, it is only a tiny crack. If it gets any worse, I shall reconsider. Right now, however, we have other problems, like this business with the so-called Whiteness. Let us deal with that first, and then consider other matters.”

§

Gehn crouched beside the crack in the meadow as the rain fell, his eyes narrowed.

He had spent hours back in D’ni, finding the right words in the ancient book, but for some quite incomprehensible reason they had made no difference.

Gehn stood, combing his fingers back through his rain-slicked hair, then kicked a lump of earth into the crack, the frustration he felt at that moment making him want to hit out at something. The problem was a simple one—he knew that instinctively. It had something to do with the underlying structures, but precisely what it was he didn’t know. Yes, and that was the worst of it, for whenever he thought, finally, that he understood it, something would come along to prove him wrong—to show him that, far from having grasped the solid principles beneath it all, he was as far from understanding it as he had ever been.

If it had only been written down somewhere. Yes, but the Guild Masters had been too clever for that. Such secrets had been passed down by word of mouth from generation to generation. The book did not exist wherein those formulas were written. That was why he had always to search old books, looking for clues, looking to unearth those wonderful, delicate phrases that would best describe this effect or that. But nothing ever said just *why* this phrase worked and that one did not.

Gehn huffed, exasperated with it all, then turned, realizing only then that his acolyte was standing there, ten paces off, his cloak drenched, the dyes run, his dark hair plastered to his head.

“What is it, man?”

“I…I wondered if you wanted anything to eat, Master.”

Eat? He waved the man away impatiently. How could the fellow think of food at a time like this?

Gehn turned, staring out toward the gap in the hills. If only he could remove the Mist Wall…

He laughed quietly. Of course! It had been staring him in the face all the time! The ocean. He had only to make the ocean warm.

"One!"

The man turned, looking back up the slope at him. "Yes, Master?"

"Tell Atrus I shall return in an hour. In the meantime, have the villagers prepare a feast on the harbor front. A feast such as they have never had before!"

§

Atrus stood beside the bridge, watching the islanders go sullenly about their business, while he went over in his head what his father had said to him.

Gehn's decision not to stabilize this Age played heavily on Atrus's mind. He felt somehow *responsible* for these people. It was not their fault there were flaws in the underlying fabric of their Age. And if there really *was* a steady deterioration, surely it was their duty, as the Masters of this Age, to set things right.

Atrus sighed, then walked across, conscious of how, in these last few hours, so much had changed among the islanders. Before now they had been nothing but pleasant to him, but now, as they set up the trestle tables and prepared the food, there was an air of resentment, even of hostility, about them which made him feel uncomfortable.

If only he could do something…

He stopped dead, then turned, staring up the slope toward the old woman's hut. An idea had suddenly come to him: a way both of salving his conscience about these people and of furthering his own first attempts at D'ni Writing.

What if he were to settle here, rather than K'veer? What if he were to persuade his father to let him continue to observe this world, not simply for a few more days but over a period of months, maybe even years? Why, he could have them build an extra room onto the hut for him to use as a laboratory.

Yes, but would Gehn agree?

Atrus took out the map and studied it, tracing the circle of the lake with his fingertips. There was a way of persuading his father that it was a good idea, but it would mean taking a risk. It would mean showing Gehn what he had been working on these past few months.

He let out a long, shivering breath. Yes, but what if my father doesn't like what I've been doing? What if it only goes to prove to him that I'm not ready yet?

In truth, Atrus had wanted to wait a lot longer before he showed Gehn the Age he had been writing in his practice book. He had wanted to make sure he'd got things absolutely right before he attempted a proper book, but if doing so meant abandoning this Age, abandoning Koena and the girl and the old woman who looked after him, then surely it wasn't worth it?

He slipped the map away again, then stood there, touching the tip of his tongue to his upper lip.

What would Anna have done?

He knew the answer without thinking. She would have stayed and tried to help, even if it meant sacrificing her own plans.

So be it, then. He had only to persuade his father.

§

Gehn returned that evening, just as he had promised, appearing on the crest of the hill just as the sun was setting at his back. Silhouetted against that bloodred orb, he raised his arm and called to the islanders gathered below, his voice booming out across the silent lake.

"Look!" he said, pointing out beyond the gap in the hills. "The Mist Wall is down! The Whiteness is no more!"

The islanders crowded across to gape, witnessing for themselves the absence of the Mist Wall. In the blazing orange light of sunset they had a vista of endless ocean. They turned, a great murmur of awe running through them, then, almost as one, fell to their knees, staring back up the slope as Gehn strode down toward them.

Watching from the steps of the temple, Atrus frowned. When his father had not returned within the first few hours he had begun to worry, but now he understood. Gehn had written a new entry in the Book of Age

Thirty-seven—something, unseen, unobserved, that had got rid of the Mist Wall.

Going down to join his father on the harbor front, where the feast had been set up, Atrus felt a tenseness in his stomach. He was determined to ask him tonight whether he could stay here, to get the matter settled and done with at the earliest opportunity, but he remembered the last time he had asked his father for something—that time when he had wanted to go back to the cleft and visit Anna—and was afraid lest Gehn said no again.

And if he does?

Atrus sighed, then made his way across he bridge. If Gehn refused, that would be it. There was no way he could defy his father over such an important matter. Besides, all Gehn had to do was refuse him access to the book.

No one noticed him come out onto the harbor front. All eyes were focused up the hill, watching as Gehn came down among them, magnificently attired in velvet and leather.

As Gehn stepped out into the open space, his acolyte, Loena, stepped forward to greet him. He bowed low, then scattered a handful of tiny yellow petals at Gehn's feet.

Gehn looked about him, coldly imperious at that moment, then, spying Atrus between the tables, gestured for him to come across.

"Father?" he asked quietly, noting the strange look in Gehn's eyes, but Gehn was not to be interrupted. Turning to face the crowd, he raised his arm again.

"From henceforth, there will be no mention of Mist or Whiteness. From this hour the very words are forbidden! But now let us eat. Let us celebrate this new beginning!"

Atrus stared at his father's back, wondering what he meant by that—whether it was, truly, a "new beginning."

Yet as the islanders filed past to take their seats at the long tables and begin the evening's feasting, Atrus saw how their eyes stared at Gehn in awe, scarce able to credit that such a wonder had come to pass.

§

It was late—very late—when they finally retired. Making his bed up in the corner of the tent, Atrus was conscious of his father pacing up

and down behind his screen, the glowing pipe visible through the thick silk panels. They had barely spoken since Gehn's announcement, and Atrus had a good dozen questions he wanted to ask his father, but he sensed that now was not the time. Besides, he was tired, and if there were things to discuss, nothing was that urgent that it could not wait until the morning. Not even his idea of staying here.

He was just settling, turning on his side to face the tent wall, when he grew aware of the scent of Gehn's pipe close by. He turned, to find Gehn standing over him.

"We must be gone from here tomorrow."

"Gone?"

"I have things to do elsewhere. Important things."

Atrus hesitated, then sat up, staring at his father in the half dark. "I was going to ask you something."

"Then ask."

"I thought I might be able to help you…you know, if I made some long-term observations of the island. I thought maybe we could have the islanders build a hut for me. I could move my things here from K'veer and maybe have them make me an extra room for my experiments."

"No."

"No? But…"

Gehn turned away. "No buts, Atrus. The notion of you being here on your own, unsupervised, is completely out of the question. It does not fit with my plans."

"But if we could understand why things are going wrong…"

"You will not persist with this, Atrus. I have more important concerns than this trifling Age."

"Then why did you give me the phrases to study? Why did you remove the Mist Wall if you were thinking simply of abandoning this Age?"

"You presume to know my reasons, Atrus?"

"No, it's just that I feel your original instinct was right. If we can understand what is going wrong here, we can prevent such things from happening elsewhere."

He heard his father's sharply indrawn breath, but instead of the expected explosion of anger, Gehn was silent.

Atrus sat forward. He could barely see his father in the darkness. The white moon was still up, but its light barely penetrated the thick canvas. The only real illumination in the tent was the gentle glow of Gehn's pipe, which cast its faint blue light over his chin and mouth and nose.

"Father?"

Gehn turned his head slightly, but still there was no answer.

Atrus fell silent, waiting. After a moment, his father turned and came across again.

"What you say has some merit, Atrus, and, as you say, accords with my original intentions. And even should this Age deteriorate further, it might prove useful to investigate the manner of that deterioration. Likewise, the building of a special hut here—for experimental use—is a good one, provided, that is, no books or journals are left here which might fall into the wrong hands. That said, I still cannot permit you to stay here alone, Atrus. It is too dangerous. Besides, we must keep up with your lessons, and as I have other Ages to attend to, I cannot be forever coming here. No. You shall remain on K'veer, but we shall continue to visit this Age from time to time, and while we are here you will continue with your detailed observations."

It was far less than Atrus had hoped for, yet it was something. He knew now that his guess had been right. Gehn had been willing to abandon this age and leave it to its fate. Now, at least, he had the chance to do some good here. And if he *could* discover what was going wrong, then perhaps his father would begin to trust him and allow him greater liberty.

But that was for the future. As he lay down, the scent of Gehn's pipe lulling him in the darkness, he recalled the look of astonishment and awe on the islanders' faces as they stared out at the endless ocean. And as he drifted into sleep one final insight came to him from the darkness.

He made the ocean warm…

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Gehn stood several paces off, watching as Atrus dug the spade deep into the grassy surface of the meadow, using his booted heel, then
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pushed down on the handle, turning back the turf, exposing the dark richness of the earth beneath.

Throwing the spade aside, Atrus knelt beside the hole. Taking a dark blue cloth from inside his pocket, he lay it beside him, then began to lay out the instruments he needed—spatulas and droppers, scoops and pipettes, and four small capped jars containing variously colored chemicals—removing them one by one from the broad leather belt he wore about his waist.

Finally, he took a slender black case from the inside pocket of his tunic and, opening it, took out four long glass tubes and lay them next to the shining silver instruments. That accomplished, he looked up at Gehn, his glasses glinting in the afternoon sun.

"I'm ready, father."

Gehn lifted his chin slightly, his own glasses opaqued against the brightness. "Then let us see what has resulted, eh?"

Atrus set to work, using one of the scoops to place a small amount of earth into each of the tubes. That done, he picked up the first of the jars, uncapped it, then set it down again.

Using one of the droppers, he drew up a measure of the clear amber liquid and, taking the first of the tubes, added it to the earth, swilling the mixture around at the bottom of the tube.

Lifting it up into the light, he studied it a while, then, nodding to himself, threw the dropper aside and, taking a cork, sealed the tube.

He went through the motions again, this time taking a heaped spatula of light blue powder to add to the earth in the second tube, mixing the two together thoroughly.

Twice more he carried out the procedure, until all four tubes lay stoppered on the cloth. Pleased with himself, Atrus looked to Gehn once more.

"I think it's worked."

"You think?"

Atrus looked down. "I'm pretty sure it has. The reactions certainly correlate with what I expected, but I'd like to make absolutely sure. I'd like to test them again, back at the hut."

Gehn nodded, then turned away, drawing his cloak about him as he went. "I shall see you there then, in a while."

Atrus watched his father a moment, then set about packing away his equipment. He had expected more from Gehn, a smile, perhaps, or some small indication, by word or gesture, that he was pleased with what he had achieved, but as ever there was nothing.

Glancing up, he noticed that the young girl, Salar, was watching from the far side of the meadow, and smiled to himself. He was rather fond of her, in a big brotherly kind of way, but she was not the best of company. It was not as if he could really talk to her; at least not the way he had talked to Anna.

He pushed the thought away, determined not to be morose. Not today, anyway. For today, if his further tests did prove him right, he had achieved a great thing.

As he fastened the sample case, then slipped the instruments back into his belt, he allowed himself a smile.

By rights Gehn should have been inordinately proud of him for finding such an elegant solution; but Gehn was Gehn, his distance part of his intelligence. It had been a full week before Gehn had even read the brief phrase he had written for the Age Thirty-seven book. With a shrug, Atrus stood, looking about him a moment, checking he had not left anything. Then, with a brief wave and a smile to Salar, he started back.

They had built a new hut close to the old woman's, extending it, as he'd suggested, to include a separate room where they could carry out experiments. Gehn was waiting for him there, his own equipment already set up.

"Here," he said, gesturing to Atrus. "Give me the samples. I shall carry out my own tests."

"Father…" He bowed, hiding his disappointment, then handed over the slender case.

Ut at least Gehn was taking him seriously. When he had first proposed this, Gehn had ridiculed the idea:

"Why, I have been searching for close to twenty years for such a phrase! And you say you have found one that will solve the problem?"

It was not strictly true. He had not found it in a book, he had worked it out for himself from first principles, after studying the matter for nearly eight months. But Gehn had not wanted to hear his explanation. Gehn was interested only in whether it worked or not.

And now it was his turn to watch as Gehn took a little of each sample and, placing each on a separate slide, began to examine the first of them under the big, gold-cased instrument he had brought with him from D’ni.

For a tense few minutes Gehn barely moved, only the faintest movement of his fingers on the calibrated knobs, then he removed his eye from the long tube and looked across at Atrus.

“The bacteria are different.”

“Not all of them.”

Gehn stared at him silently, as if expecting him to say something more; when he didn’t, he looked away, taking the second of the slides and fitting it into the viewing slot.

Atrus watched him, smiling now. Adding to the mix of different bacteria had been the final touch—the thing that had finally made it work. Years ago, in the cleft, he had tried a much simpler, purely chemical solution to the same kind of problem, and had failed. Here he had tried to look at the whole picture—chemical and bacteriological—and it had worked.

It wasn’t the solution to everything that was wrong—and he had been careful, when he’d first presented it to his father, not to offer any form of criticism of the Age—but it was a start. And maybe, if his father trusted him more after this, he could make further changes.

He longed to see the Age Thirty-seven book to confirm his hypotheses and discuss it with his father, but he knew how sensitive Gehn was.

He let out a long breath, remembering the long hours he had spent researching the subject. Until he had begun to study the composition of soil, he had not understood the full complexity of it. But now he saw it clearly. One had to build worlds from the bottom up, beginning with what was below the soil.

Gehn grunted, then looked across again, giving a terse nod.

“This is good. You must show me the book where you found this. It may have other things we can use.”

Atrus looked down. Maybe Gehn would forget. Maybe he’d be distracted by something else. Or, if the worst came to the worst and he insisted, the “book” could have an accident somehow.

“All right,” Gehn said, taking the slide from the viewer, then beginning to pack away the microscope, “let us clear up and get back to D’ni. I think our work is done here for a time.”

“Done?”

Gehn nodded, then clicked the lid shut on the box that held the microscope. “I think we should leave this Age alone for a week or two and see how things develop. If there are any side effects, they should show up in that time.”

“Side effects?”

But Gehn was impatient to return. “Come, Atrus. Pack your things. I want to be back within the hour.”

§

Two days had passed now since their return from the Thirty-seventh Age, and in all that time Atrus had not seen hide nor hair of his father.

He knew where Gehn was, of course, for the very moment they had linked back, Gehn had rushed up the stairs to his study and locked himself in.

Atrus had thought his father might reappear at mealtimes, but he had not come down even then.

And now the darkness was falling on another day, and still he had no idea of what his father was up to.

Walking over to the desk in the corner of his room, Atrus picked up his journal and, stepping out onto the balcony, opened it at one of the earliest entries; one written when he was barely nine years old:

> Anna says that the cleft is an “environment” and that an “environment” is composed of many different elements, all of which have an effect upon each other. She says that though some of those things—the sun, for instance—are not actually in the cleft itself, they must still be taken into account when we look at how the cleft works. Too much sun and plants die, too little and they never grow. I asked her—how do we manage to live here at all?

He sat upon the balustrade, looking out toward the great rock and the city beyond, and sighed. Looking back across the years, it was indeed a wonder that they had survived. How much of a wonder, he had not fully realized until now.

I have come a long way, he thought, but I have still not half the understanding that she had.

Atrus turned, meaning to go back inside and write a line or two, and saw that Rijus was standing in the middle of the room, looking across at him.

He had long ago got used to the man's silence and to his sudden appearances in rooms, yet he found himself still curious about what the man knew, what secrets he had. Yes, and what it was like to inhabit a world of words one could not penetrate.

Walking through, he set his journal down, then looked across at the man.

"You have a message for me, Rijus?"

Rijus bowed his head, then held out the note.

At last, he thought, knowing it was a summons. *What has the man been up to?*

He unfolded it and cast his eyes quickly over the elaborate handwriting. It was terse and to the point.

"My study. Now."

He nodded to Rijus, dismissing him, then went across and slipped the journal into the case he kept it in, locking the clasp with the key. Then, satisfied that all was secure, he hurried out.

Gehn was waiting in his study, ensconced behind his desk. There was a pile of copy books at his elbow, another five spread out along the front of his desk.

With a jolt of surprise, Atrus recognized them. They were his!

"Ah, Atrus," Gehn said, glancing up, then continuing to write in the open book in front of him, "come and sit down across from me."

Atrus took the seat, facing his father, watching as Gehn finished the sentence he was writing, then put the pen back into the ink pot.

Gehn looked up at him, then nodded toward the books. "As you see, I have been reading your practice books, and I have selected five which, I fee, have some small merit."

He waited, tensed now.

“I want you to choose one.”

“Father?”

Gehn passed his hand over the five books. “At present these are but words on paper. But now I am giving you the chance to make one of these books real.”

Atrus blinked.

“Yes. I am giving you a blank book, a *Kortee-nea*. You will choose one of these five books and write it out properly into the *Kortee-nea*.”

Here it was, the moment he had dreamed of, and he was unprepared for it.

“Well?” Gehn said, frowning at him. “Which one is it to be?”

Atrus leaned forward, looking to see which books his father had selected, surprised by the choice of two of them. But his main book was there. He reached out and tapped it. “This one.”

Gehn nodded. “A good choice.” Turning in his seat, he reached down, then lifted a big, leather-bound book from the pile beside him, then held it out to Atrus.

Atrus took it, his mouth suddenly dry, his heart pounding. A book! His father had given him a book!

“You must be very careful, Atrus. Any mistakes you make in copying will be set into the Age. You must check every word, every phrase after you have copied it. Yes, and recheck it. And if you *do* make a mistake, then be sure to bring the book to me.”

He bowed his head. “Father.”

“Good. Now take your copybook and go. And Atrus?”

“Yes, father?”

“You might add that phrase you recently discovered. The phrase about the soil. It will do your Age no harm, after all.”

§

Gehn lay the book flat on the desk before Atrus, then opened it to reveal the empty descriptive box on the right-hand page. Until he linked, it would be blank—or almost so, for there was a chaotic swirl of particles, like a snowstorm—yet as soon as he emerged into the new Age, the image would appear, as if by magic, on the page.

“Shall I go first?” Gehn asked, looking to him, “or would you like that honor?”

Though he had linked many times now—so often that it had almost become a thing of routine—this once he was afraid: afraid because *he* had made this age.

“Well?” Gehn insisted when he did not answer.

“I’ll go,” he said, then, taking a long, calming breath, he placed his right hand on the empty page.

There was a crackle of static, as though a faint electrical current had passed through his hand. It seemed drawn into the very fabric of the page, then, with a sudden, sickening lurch, Atrus felt himself sucked into the rapidly expanding whiteness of the page.

In that instant he felt the familiar “shifting” sensation of the link. For that brief moment it felt as though he were melting. And then, with a shocking suddenness that never diminished, the blackness seeped through until there was nothing *but* the blackness.

And as he finally surrendered to that blackness, so he found himself back in his body, standing on the cold damp earth inside a low-ceilinged cavern.

Relieved, Atrus shook himself, then stepped aside, conscious that his father was linking after him.

He waited, expecting Gehn to appear at any moment, for the air to take on that strangely fluid quality it had when someone was linking through—a quality that, looking at it, was like a flaw, an *occlusion*, in the eye itself.

Strange. Atrus frowned and made to step toward the space he’d just left, even as the air changed and, like a bubble squeezed out of the nothingness, his father appeared.

Gehn looked about him, eyeing the walls critically. “Good,” he said quietly, taking in a deep breath. “The air smells very fresh.”

Atrus watched his father, conscious that he was being judged, that this was a test of sorts.

“You have the Linking Book on you, I assume?”

Slowly, Atrus’s mouth fell open. The Linking Book! In his excitement he had completely forgotten about the Linking Book! He was so used to traveling in Ages where the Linking Books were already in place, that he had overlooked it!

He groaned, the blood draining from his face.

Gehn held out a Linking Book before his eyes. “You forgot. But fortunately *I* did not.”

Atrus closed his eyes, the thought that he might have trapped them there forever making him tremble.

“I’m sorry…” he began, but Gehn cut him short with a terse little gesture of his hand. His father’s eyes were livid with rage.

“Do *not* tell me how sorry you are, Atrus. Sorry is utterly inadequate. Sorry is for fools and idiots who cannot think straight. I considered you better than that, but your gross carelessness in this instance is a sign of your immaturity. There was but one single, crucial thing you had to remember, and you forgot!” Gehn huffed out a great sigh of exasperation, then smacked the book against the top of Atrus’s head, his voice rising with controlled anger. “What if I had not thought to bring your Linking Book? What then? Where would we be?”

Herei, Atrus thought. Forever here.

Gehn thrust the book into his hands, then turned away, making for the entrance.

Atrus stood uncertainly, then followed his father across.

“Well,” Gehn said, slowing down to let Atrus catch up, but refusing to look at him. “I suppose you had better show me what you have written.”

He led his father out, through a narrow stone passage that was very different from how he’d imagined it—how he *thought* he’d written it—and into a cavelike depression that was open to the sky, bright sunlight pouring down into it from the clear blue heavens. There was a pool to one side, surrounded by lush vegetation and a few light-colored rocks, while on the far side a flight of tiered rocks climbed the rock face.

Gehn pulled his glasses down over his eyes then stepped out into the sunlight. For a long while he was silent, almost as if he disapproved of what he saw, but when he spoke, it was with an air of surprise.

“This is good, Atrus. You appear to have chosen the different elements well. They complement each other perfectly.” He turned, looking directly at Atrus, who still stood in the shadow. “Which books did you use?”

As ever, Gehn thought that he had derived the different elements of his Age from various ancient books, the way Gehn himself did. But Atrus

hadn’t done that here. This was all his, uniquely his. The greatest trouble he’d had was in finding the right D’ni words to express what he wanted.

That was why it had taken him so long. Why he had had to be so patient.

“I…I can’t remember,” he said finally. “There were so many.”

“No matter,” Gehn said. He glanced at Atrus briefl, then walked on.

Skirting the pool, Gehn paused to look about him, then began to climb the steps. Pulling down his glasses, Atrus hurried after, surprised that Gehn had made no other comment. Didn’t all this remind him of something? Couldn’t Gehn see what he’d tried to do here?

It was the cleft. Simplified, admittedly, and without the buildings that had been in the original, but the shape of it, the physical materials were, as far as he could make it, precisely as he remembered them.

Halfway up the steps he stopped and turned, scanning the floor of the cleft to see whether the one specific he had written in had taken as he’d hoped. His eyes searched a moment, seeing nothing, then, with a jolt of pure delight, he saw them, just there in the deep shadow on the far side. Flowers. Tiny, delicate blue flowers.

He grinned, then began to climb again. It had taken him a lot of time and effort choosing the precise soil type and the balance of minerals in the soil, but it had worked!

Gehn was waiting for him up above, one hand stroking his chin as he surveyed the view.

Joining him, Atrus looked out, seeing, for the first time, the Age he had created.

It was a rolling landscape of hills and valleys, with lush pasture and thick, dark green forests. Rivers threaded their silver way through that verdant paradise, winking now and then into the blue of lakes. To the far left, in the distance, there were mountains—snowcapped and majestic, and beneath them a blue-green stretch of sea.

And over all a rich blue cloudless sky, dominated by a large yellow sun, like the sun of Earth. Atrus stood there, entranced, listening to the peaceful sound of birdsong. For a moment he didn’t even notice, then he half-turned, his eyes widening.

Birds? I didn’t write birds!

His father stepped up beside him. "You should have experimented more."

Atrus looked to his father, surprised by his comment, which seemed a complete contradiction of his own style of writing.

"You might have tried a different sun, for instance," Gehn said, pointing to it, "or chosen a different kind of rock to make those mountains."

"But…"

"Next time you should use a few less conventional touches, Atrus. It would not do to make your worlds too staid."

Atrus looked down, dismayed by his father's words. But what about that view? Wasn't that spectacular? And the air and the soil here—wasn't it good that they were so healthy? Oh, he knew this Age was simple, but he had planned to take one step at a time. *And this world wouldn't fall apart…*

"Still," Gehn added, "you need not keep this Age. Now that I know you can write, I shall give you other books. You can experiment in them. Then, once you have finally made an Age that I am happy with, you can call that your First Age."

"But I've *named* this world."

"Named it?" Gehn laughed dismissively. "That was a trifle premature. I could understand, perhaps, if there were people here, but…"

"I called it Inception."

Gehn stared at him a moment, then turned away. Walking across, he pulled a leaf from a bush, rolling it between his gloved fingers, then lifted it to his nose to sniff it before he threw it away.

"All right. I think we had better go back now."

Atrus, who had been about to walk on down the slope, turned to face his father again. "Go back?"

Gehn barely glanced at him. "Yes."

"But I thought…" Atrus swallowed. "I thought we could see more of this Age. I wanted to take samples of the soil, and catch one of the creatures for study. I wanted…"

"You heard me, Atrus. Now *come!* If you must, you can come back another time, but right now I must get back. I have a great deal to arrange before the Korfah V'ja."

Atrus had never heard the term before. "Korfah V'ja?"

Gehn looked to him. “Tomorrow, at noon on the Thirty-seventh Age.” And with that he walked on.

§

Back in the library on D’ni, Gehn closed Atrus’s book and, slipping it beneath his arm, headed for the steps that led up to his study.

“Quickly now,” he said, gesturing for Atrus to follow. “We need to prepare you.”

The room seemed unaltered since Atrus had last seen it. If anything, it was even more untidy than before, with even more books piled about the walls. Gehn’s cloak lay, carelessly discarded, over the back of the chair beside the fireplace, the grate filled with the ashes of a recent fire.

Atrus blinked, imagining his father working here late into the night, the flickering firelight making the shadows in the room dance.

“Sit down,” Gehn said, pointing to the chair across the desk from him. “We have much to do before the morning.”

Atrus sat, watching as Gehn put his book down on the pile at the side of his desk, then peeled the glasses from the top of his head and stuffed them into the drawer beside him.

“Father?”

“Yes, Atrus?”

“What is the Korfah V’ja?”

Gehn barely glanced at him. He took a book from the side, then set out a Writing pen and an ink pot on the desk beside it. “It is a ceremony for a new god,” he answered, sitting down and opening the book.

The book was not blank. It was already written in. From where he sat, Atrus could see that the last two entries had been added to the page only recently.

“I don’t know…”

Gehn looked at him. “Of course you know.”

He took the ink pot and unscrewed the top, then looked across at his son. “You are a true D’ni now, Atrus. A Writer. You have made an Age. That fact ought to be recognized. Besides, it does not do to become too familiar with the peoples of our worlds. They must be reminded of our godhood now and then, and what better way than a ceremony?”

“Yes, but…”

“I am arranging something special for the occasion.”

Gehn hesitated a moment, his eyes half-closed, thinking, then dipped then pen into the pot.

“What are you doing, father?”

“Making changes.”

“Changes?”

Gehn nodded. “Small ones. Things you cannot see.”

“Then that…” Atrus pointed, “is the Age Thirty-seven book?”

“Yes.”

Atrus felt himself go cold. He thought Gehn had finished with making changes. He thought that Age was “fixed.”

“Father?”

Gehn glanced at him distractedly. “What is it, Atrus?”

“What you said, about me being less conventional in my writing. What did you mean exactly? Did you mean I ought to take more risks?”

Gehn looked up, then set his pen aside. “Not risks, so much, as… Well, let me be blunt with you, Atrus: you take too long about things. Far, far too long. These copybooks,” he gestured toward the stack beside him, “there’s barely a thing in most of them! When I gave you the choice of five, I knew which one you would pick, because it was the only one that was even vaguely like a proper Age!”

Gehn stood, leaning over his desk. “Dammit, boy, you should have made a dozen, twenty Ages by now! You should have experimented a little, tried out a few things to see what worked and what didn’t. Sticking to the tried-and-tested, that is all well and good for scribes, but not for us, Atrus! Not for us!”

Atrus stared At Gehn, bewildered by the patent contradiction in his father’s words. Did his father want quick worlds or stable worlds? Or something else entirely?

Gehn huffed, exasperated. “You are no good to me if you work at this pace all the time. I need Ages. Dozens of them. *Hundreds* of them! That is our task, Atrus, don’t you see? Our sacred task. To make Ages and populate them. To fill up the nothingness with worlds. Worlds we can own and govern, so that the D’ni will be great again. So that my grandsons will be lords of a million worlds!”

Gehn stood there a moment longer, his eyes piercing Atrus, then he sat, shaking his head slowly, as if disappointed.

"You had best go to your room now. I shall send Rijus down to see you. He will bring you the special clothes you are to wear for the ceremony."

§

Something was wrong. They knew it even as they stepped out beneath the dark, cloud-dominated sky of the Thirty-seventh Age. As they stood there, a warm, unsavory wind blew into their faces, gusting as if from a vent, its normal strong salinity tainted by other, more bitter presences.

Atrus looked to his father and saw how Gehn grimaced then touched his tongue against his upper palate, as if to get a better taste of that unwholesome air.

"What is it?"

Gehn concentrated a moment longer, then, ignoring Atrus's question, strode on. But he had not gone more than a dozen paces before he stopped dead, his whole face drained of expression, his lips parting the merest fraction.

Atrus walked across and stood beside his father on the ridge, looking out over the village and the lake, shocked by what he saw.

The lake was dry, its exposed surface filled with dark cracks. Two dozen fishing boats lay on their sides in the bone-dry mud.

Atrus turned, looking toward the sea. There, through the gap in the hills, where the channel ended and the sea had once begun, was a ledge of solid rock. Dry rock, crusted with dried up seaweed and barnacled rocks.

Like a desert scrubland, he thought, recalling the first time he had had the thought, in the boat with Tarkuk and his son.

And beyond that ledge…nothing. Only air.

A great sound of wailing and groaning came up to them on the wind. Atrus looked, trying to locate its source in the village, but the village was deserted. Then, suddenly, he saw them, on the other side of the bridge, in front of the meeting hut. They were all there, huddled together in fear, staring out across the gouged eye of the lake or looking woefully

up at the black and hostile sky. Only Koena stood, moving among them, bending down to talk to this one or lay his hand upon that one's arm.

"What's happened here?" he asked, turning to Gehn once more.

Gehn slowly shook his head. There was a look of disbelief in his face. "It was all right," he said quietly. "We fixed it. Those phrases…there was nothing wrong with them."

And yet something was wrong. Something had drained the lake and left the island stranded above the level of the surrounding ocean. *Something* had caused that. It must have. Because things like this did not happen on their own.

A phrase swam into Atrus's mind. *He made the ocean warm…*

Was that it? Had that seemingly small alteration set up a contradiction? Or, to achieve it, had Gehn tampered with some other crucial element in this Age? Had he tilted the axis of the planet, perhaps, to bring it closer to the sun so that the water was warmer? Or was it something else? What if he'd tampered with the plates beneath the ocean? What if Gehn had set up a weakness in the ocean floor that had finally succumbed to the great pressures down there, causing this lowering of the ocean's level? Or what if he had simply picked a phrase from a D'ni book that referred to a warm ocean without understanding where it came from or what its context was?

He would never know. Not without consulting the Age Thirty-seven book, and Gehn was quite adamant that he was not to read his books.

Great black-fisted thunderclouds were gathering overhead now. There was the low grumble of thunder.

Looking about him, his face much harder than it had been only moments before, Gehn began to walk slowly down the hill toward the village.

§

"But Great Master, you *have* to help us. You *must!*"

"Must?" Gehn turned his head and stared at the kneeling man disdainfully. "Who *says* I must?"

An hour had passed since they had come and Gehn sat in his chair, at his desk in the great tent, the glowing pipe cradled in his hands.

The first thing Gehn had done was to send the islanders back to their huts, forbidding them to set a foot outside, then he had come here and lit his pipe. Since then he had not moved, but had sat there, silently brooding, his brows heavily knitted.

And Koena had come to petition his Master; afraid to defy his command, yet equally afraid to leave things be. His world was dying and there was only one person who could save it—the Lord Gehn.

Atrus, standing just behind Koena, felt a great wave of respect and admiration for the man swell up in him.

"Forgive me, Master," Koena began again, his eyes not daring to meet Gehn's, "but have we angered you somehow? Is this our punishment? If so, tell us how we might make amends. But please, I beg you, save us. Bring back the sea and fill the lake for us, Master, I implore you!"

Gehn slammed the pipe down on the desk and stood. "Enough!"

He seemed to take a long, indrawn breath, then slowly stepped around the table until he stood over the cowering Koena.

"You are right," Gehn said, his voice cold and imperious. "This is a punishment. A demonstration of my awesome powers."

Gehn paused, then, turning his back on the man, began to pace the floor. "I thought it necessary to show you what would happen should you ever think to defy me. I felt it…appropriate."

Atrus stared at his father, openmouthed, in the silence that followed.

Gehn made a slow circuit of the tent, moving behind Atrus as if he wasn't there. Then, as if the thought followed on from the last, he threw a question at Keona. "Are the preparations complete?"

"Master?" The kneeling man dared the smallest glance.

"The preparations," Gehn repeated, as if speaking to a child, "for the ceremony."

Koena blinked, then nodded; then, realizing what he had done, he hastily dropped his head again and said, "Yes, Master. Everything is ready."

"Then we shall hold the ceremony in an hour. You will gather the islanders on the slope in front of the temple."

"The temple?" Then Koena understood. Gehn meant the meeting hut. Even so, he seemed rooted to the spot.

“Well?” Gehn said, turning around so that he faced his servant again. “Had you not better go and arrange things?”

“Master?” Koena’s face was suddenly a blank. He seemed bemused, in shock.

“I said go. Gather the villagers and prepare for the ceremony. I do not wish to be kept waiting.”

Koena backed away a little. “But Master…aren’t you going to help us? The lake…”

“Go!” Gehn yelled, his face dark with fury. His hand had gone down to his waist and produced a long dagger from beneath his cloak. “Now! Before I slit you open like a fish!”

Koena’s head jerked up, his eyes staring fearfully at the razor-sharp blade; then, with a tiny bow, he turned and almost ran from the tent.

Atrus took a step toward him. “Father?”

But Gehn wasn’t listening. He stared blackly at the tent flap where Koena had just departed, then made a sour movement of his mouth. He glanced at Atrus, as if looking at a book or some other object he had forgotten he had placed there, then, sheathing the knife, turned and went back to his desk.

Picking up his pipe, he drew deeply in it, then sat back, resting his neck against the back of the chair and closing his eyes.

“Father?”

But Gehn was impervious to words. Pursing his lips, he blew a long stream of smoke into the air.

An hour. The Korfah V’ja—the god-crowning ceremony—was in an hour.

§

Koena had gathered the islanders, all two hundred of them, and made them kneel, heads bowed, on the slope before the meeting hut. Five great torches burned on the top of tall poles that were set into the ground between the people and the hut, their flames gusting and flickering in the wind. Deep shadows danced in that mesmeric light, like an evil spirit searching among that gathered mass for one specific soul to torment.

They were mainly silent, cowering beneath the mass of dark and threatening clouds, yet each growl or rumble of that heavenly chorus

provoked a corresponding moan from those frightened souls.

At the prearranged signal, Koena turned and raised his arms, calling upon the god to come down. At once, Gehn stepped from the darkness between the wooden pillars, resplendent in a long, flowing cloak of pure gold thread lined with black silk, his white hair framed by a strange, pentagonal halo of gold that flashed in the flickering torchlight.

"People of the Thirty-seventh Age," he commanded, his voice booming over the noises of the storm, "prostrate yourselves before your new Master, the Great Lord Atrus."

Reluctantly, Atrus came down the steps until he stood beside his father. He was wearing a cloak and halo much like Gehn's, only his were a brilliant red, the material shining transparently, as though it were made of a million tiny rubies.

In genuine awe, the people pressed their foreheads to the earth, murmuring the words the acolyte had had them prepare.

"The Lord Atrus is our Master. He blesses us with his presence."

Gehn beamed, then called to the two men still inside the temple. "Attendants! Come!"

Slowly, with great ceremony, the two attendants—recruited from among the fishermen—came from within the temple, carrying between them on a velvet cushion an astonishing pendant of precious metals and bloodred jewels and delicate porcelain.

Stepping forward, Koena stood before the two men, passing his hands over the great pendant in blessing in the way Gehn had shown him. Then, moving back, he looked to Atrus, who had turned to face him.

"And now," Gehn said, his voice echoing across the black and empty lake, "behold the Great Lord Atrus!"

And as Koena lifted the pendant and placed it around Atrus's neck, careful not to knock the halo, so Gehn pointed up toward the sky.

There was a great clash of thunder and a flash. For the briefest moment Atrus saw the surprise in his father's face and knew he moment was sheer coincidence. Yet in an instant Gehn's face changed, swelling with pride, his eyes blazing with a fierce intelligence.

"Behold, the rain!"

And then, as if he really had commanded it, the heavens opened, the torrent so heavy that each drop seemed to rebound from the earth, drenching things in an instant.

The earth trembled like a beaten drum.

Atrus stared, astonished. Before him on the slope, two hundred faces were turned up in awe as the precious water fell on them like a solid weight.

Koena looked to his Master, as if to ask whether or not he should continue, but Gehn seemed undaunted by the downpour. It was almost as if he *had* planned it.

"The handmaiden…where is the handmaiden?"

Koena turned, then gestured toward the girl Satar, who was clutching a garland of woven flowers, like the one they had presented to Gehn when Atrus had first come to the Age. But Salar could not move. Salar was petrified. She stared up at the sky, her eyes like tiny, startled beads.

Seeing how it was, Gehn strode down and grasped her by the arm, then began to drag her across the muddy slope toward the hissing torches and the temple beyond.

Appalled by his father's treatment of the girl, Atrus started forward. "Father! Let her go!"

Coming closer, Gehn glared at him, the fierceness in that look enough to make Atrus lower his gaze.

Gehn threw the girl down at Atrus's feet. "The garland!" he growled. "Present the Lord Atrus with the garland!"

Atrus wanted to reach down to pick the girl up, but his father's eyes were on him, defying him to help her.

And still the rain beat down relentlessly.

Slowly Salar got up onto her knees. The garland, which she still held loosely in one hand, was ruined now—mud-spattered and ripped in several places. She glanced up at him, frightened now and tearful.

"Lord Atrus…" she began, her voice almost inaudible beneath the noise of the storm.

"Speak up, girl!" Gehn bellowed. "Let's hear you now!"

"Lord Atrus…" she began again, her voice struggling to keep an even tone.

There was a great flash, a huge thunderclap. The young girl shrieked and dropped the garland.

"Kerath help us!" Gehn said impatiently, then, placing the heel of his boot against her shoulder, pushed her roughly aside and bent down to

pick up the ruined garland. He studied it a moment, then, with a grimace of disgust, discarded it.

Gehn turned, looking to Koena. “Dismiss them,” he said. “The ceremony is over!”

But Koena wasn’t listening. Koena was staring at the lake, watching the precious water drain away into the cracks. The rain fell and fell, but it id no good. It would have to rain for a thousand years to fill that lake, for the lake drained into the sea and the sea into the ocean, and the ocean…the ocean now lay a hundred yards or more below that great ledge of rock that once had been a seabed.

Koena turned, looking to Gehn. “Master, you have to save us! Please, Master, I beg you!”

But Gehn, who had seen what Koena had seen, simply turned away. Throwing off his crown, he unfastened his cloak at the neck and let it fall, then, going over to the tent, ducked inside, everging a moment later with his knapsack, into which he quickly stowed his pipe.

“Come,” he said, gesturing to Atrus. “The ceremony’s over.”

Atrus stared a moment, then, casting aside the pendant, ran after Gehn, catching up with him and grasping his arm, turned him so that he faced him, shouting into his face over the sound of the storm.

“We must get back and change things! Now, before it’s too late!”

“Too late? It is already too late! Look at it! I said it was unstable!”

“No!” Atrus yelled, desperate now. “You can change it. You can erase the changes you made and put things right. You *can*. You told me you can! After all, you are a god, aren't you?”

That last seemed to hit home. Gehn gave the briefest nod, then, pushing past his son, hurried across the bridge, making his way back up the rain-churned slope toward the cave, leaving Atrus to run after him.

15

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For an hour now Gehn had sat at his desk in silence, deaf to Atrus’s pleas, staring into the air blankly as he sucked on his pipe.

“You have to do something,” Atrus said, taking up the cause again. “You *have* to! They’re dying back there!”

Nothing. Not even the flicker of an eyebrow.
~~~~~~~~~~

Atrus grimaced, trying not to imagine their suffering back there on the Thirty-seventh Age, trying not to think of the old woman and the girl, but it was impossible.

He stared at Gehn. It was the first time he had seen this side of his father; this *indecisiveness*. This hideous indifference.

"Won't you help them, father? Won't you?"

Nothing.

Something snapped in him. Stepping up to the desk, Atrus leaned across, meaning to take the book.

"If you won't, then let me…"

Gehn's hand gripped his like a vice. He looked up into Atrus's face, his eyes hard. *"You?"*

It was the first thing Gehn had said for ages.

Atrus pulled his hand free. "they're dying," he said for what seemed like the thousandth time. "We *have* to help them. We could make changes."

Gehn laughed bleakly. "Changes?"

"To fix things."

Gehn's eyes held his a moment, then looked away.

In his mind Atrus saw it again, the water pouring from the edge of the great rock table as it rose and rose on a cushion of red hot lava.

"So that's it, is it?" he said, glaring at his father. "You *can't* fix it?"

Gehn straightened up, looking at Atrus, something of the old arrogance in his eyes. "Did I *say* that?"

For a moment longer Gehn glared back at his son, then, opening the Book of the Thirty-seventh Age, he reached across and, dipping the pen into the ink pot, proceeded to cross out the last few entries in the book, using the D'ni negating symbol.

"There," he said, handing the book to Atrus. "I have fixed it."

Atrus stared at it, stunned.

Gehn nodded at the book. "Well? You want to check for yourself?"

He had been almost too afraid to ask. "Can I?"

"That *is* what you wanted, no?"

Atrus nodded.

"Then go. But try not to be too long. I have wasted enough time already on those ingrates!"

§

The air in the cave was musty, but no more so than on the other occasions he had gone there. It was—and this was the important point—free of the hideous stench of sulfur. The very normality of it raised his spirits.

There, he heard his father say, handing him the book, *I've fixed it.*

Well, now he'd know.

Atrus climbed up out of the cave, then stood on the boulder, overlooking the slope, breathing in the clear, sweet air.

It was true! Gehn had fixed it! There was water in the lake and rich grass on the slopes. He could hear birdsong and the sound of the wind rustling through the nearby trees. Down below the village seemed peaceful, the islanders going about their lives quite normally.

He laughed, then jumped down, hurrying now, keen to ask Salar just what exactly had happened in his absence, what changes she had witnessed—but coming around he hump, he stopped dead, perturbed by the sight that met his eyes.

He ran to the ridge, then stood there, breathing shallowly as he looked out across the harbor. The boats were there, moored in a tight semicircle, just as before, and there was the bridge…but beyond?

He gasped, his theory confirmed in a moment. The meeting hut was gone, and the tent. In their place was a cluster of huts, like those on this side of the bridge.

Hearing a noise behind him he turned, facing Koena, surprised to see that the man was in ordinary village clothes.

"Koena?"

The man tensed at the word, the thick wooden club he held gripped tightly. There was fear in his face.

"What is it?" Atrus asked, surprised.

"Usshua umma immuni?" Koena asked, his hostility unmistakable now.

Atrus blinked. What was that language? Then, realizing he was in danger, he put his hands up, signaling that he meant no harm. "It's me, Koena. Atrus. Don't you recognize me?"

"Usshua illila umawa?" the frightened native demanded, waving his club.

Atrus shook his head, as if to clear it. What was wrong here? Why was everything so different? Out of instinct he turned back toward the cave, then stopped, realizing that there would be no Linking Book there. He felt in his pocket anxiously, then relaxed. His copy Linking Book was there.

Koena was still watching him, his eyes narrowed. But, of course, he wasn't Koena, or not the Koena he knew anyway, for his father had never been here to make him his acolyte. *No,* Atrus thought, *and nor have I.* For this was not the Thirty-seventh Age—or, at least, not that same Age his father had "created" and he, Atrus, had lived in; this was another world entirely, like it—so like it as to be frighteningly familiar—and yet somewhere else.

His head swam, as if the solid ground had fallen away from him. I am in another universe entirely, in another Age; one that my father tampered into existence.

An Age where he knew everyone and was not known. He nodded to himself, understanding what had happened. His father's erasures in the Book had taken them back down the central trunk of the great tree of possibility and along another branch entirely.

Atrus took one last long look at the Age, then, knowing he was not wanted, turned and fled toward the cave, where, after he was gone, his Linking Book would never be found.

§

In Atrus's absence Gehn had lit the fire and had sunk into the chair beside it. That was where Atrus found him, slumped back, his pipe discarded on the floor beside him, his mouth open in a stupor.

Gehn was not sleeping, or if he was, it was a fitful kind of sleep, for his eyelids fluttered and from time to time he would mutter then give a tiny groan.

Looking at him, Atrus felt angry and betrayed. Gehn had said that he was going to fix it, but he hadn't. That other world, the *real* Thirty-seventh Age, had been destroyed, or, at least, his link to it. And that was all Gehn's fault, because he hadn't understood what he was doing. Atrus stood over his father, feeling a profound contempt for him.

“Wake up!” he shouted, leaning over Gehn and giving him a shake. “I need to talk to you!”

For a moment he thought he hadn’t managed to wake Gehn. Yet as he went to shake him again, Gehn reached up and pushed his hand aside.

“Leave me be!” he grumbled. “Go on…go to your room, boy, and leave me in peace!”

“No!” Atrus said defiantly. “I won’t! Not until this is settled.”

Gehn’s left eye pried open. A kind of snarling smile appeared at one corner of his mouth. *“Settled?”*

“We need to talk,” Atrus said, keeping firm to his purpose, determined not to let his father browbeat or belittle him this time.

“Talk?” Gehn’s slow laughter had an edge of mockery to it now. “What could we possibly have to talk about, you and I?”

“I want to talk about the Art. About what it is. What it *really* is.”

Gehn stared at him disdainfully, then, sitting up, reached beside his chair for his pipe.

“Go and get some sleep, boy, and stop talking such nonsense. What do *you* know about the Art?”

“Enough to know that you’re wrong, father. That your Ages are unstable because you don’t understand what you’ve been doing all this while!”

Atrus had only guessed about most of Gehn’s worlds being unstable, but it seemed he’d hit the bull’s-eye with that comment, for Gehn sat forward, his pallid face suddenly ash white.

“You’re wrong!” Gehn hissed. “You’re just a boy. What do *you* know?”

“I know that you don’t understand the Whole!”

Gehn roared with amusement. “And you think *you* have all the answers, eh, boy?”

Atrus leaned over the table, determined to outface his father. “Some of them. But they’re not ones *you* want to here. You’d rather carry on as you are, stumbling blindly through the Ages, copying this phrase out of that book and that one out of another, as if you could somehow chance upon it that way.”

Gehn’s hands had slowly tightened their grip on the arms of the chair; now, pulling himself up out of the chair, his anger exploded. As Atrus reeled back, Gehn shouted into his face, spitting with fury.

“How *dare* you think to criticize me! Me, who taught you all you know! Who brought you here out of that godforsaken crack and educated you! How dare you even *begin* to think you have the answers!”

He poked Atrus hard in the chest. “How long have you been doing this now, eh, boy? Three years? Three and a half? And how long have I been studying the Art? Thirty years now! Thirty years! Since I was four.”

Gehn made a small noise of disgust. “You think because you managed to make one measly Age that you know it all, but you don’t, boy! You do not even know the start of it. Here…”

Gehn turned and went over to the desk. To Atrus’s dismay he picked up Atrus’s book and leafed it open. For a moment or two he read in silence.

“This phrase here…look how unnecessarily ornate it is…that’s how a novice writes, boy. It lacks strength. It lacks economy of expression.” And, reaching across, he took the pen and dipped it in the ink pot.

Atrus watched, horrified, knowing what was to come, yet still unable to believe that his father would actually dare to tamper with *his* Age.

But Gehn seemed oblivious of him now. Sitting at his desk, he drew the book toward him, then began to delete symbols here and there, using the D’ni negative, simplifying the phrases Atrus had spent so long perfecting—phrases which Atrus knew, from long reading in the ancient D’ni texts, were the perfect way of describing the things he waned in his world.

“Please…” Atrus pleaded. “There is a reason for all those words. They *have* to be there!”

“In what book did you find this?” Gehn asked, tapping another of his phrases. “This nonsense about the blue flowers?”

“It wasn’t in a book…”

“Ridiculous!” Gehn said, barely masking his contempt. “Frivolous nonsense, that’s all it is! This is overwritten, that’s all! There is far too much unnecessary detail!”

And, without another word, Gehn proceeded to score out the section about the flowers.

“No!” Atrus cried out, taking a step toward the desk.

Gehn glared at him, his voice stern. “Be quiet, boy, and let me concentrate!”

Atrus dropped his head and groaned, but Gehn seemed not to notice the pain his son was in. he turned the page and gave a tiny laugh, as if he’d found something so silly, so ludicrous, that it was worthy only of contempt.

“And this…” he said, dipping the pen into the ink pot once again, then scoring out one after another of the carefully-written symbols. “It’s no good, boy. This description…it’s superfluous!”

“Please…” Atrus said, taking a step toward him. “Leave it be now. Please, father. I beg you…”

But Gehn was unstoppable. “Oh no, and this won’t do, either. This will have to go. I mean…”

Gehn looked up suddenly, the laughter fading from his face. “You understand me clearly now?”

Atrus swallowed. “Father?”

Gehn’s eyes were cold now; colder than Atrus had ever seen them. “You must understand one thing, Atrus, and that is that you *do not* understand. Not yet, anyway. And you don’t have the answers. You might *think* you have, but you’re mistaken. You can’t learn the D’ni secrets overnight. It’s simply not possible.”

Atrus fell silent under his father’s stern gaze.

Gehn sighed, then spoke again. “I misjudged you, Atrus, didn’t I? There is something of your grandmother in you…something *headstrong*… something that likes to meddle.”

Atrus opened his mouth to speak, but Gehn raised his hand. “Let me *finish!”*

Atrus swallowed deeply, then said what he’d been meaning to say all along, whether it angered Gehn or not; because he had to say it now or burst.

“You said that you had fixed the Thirty-seventh Age.”

Gehn smiled. “I did.”

Atrus shook his head.

Gehn met his eyes calmly. “Yes…?”

“I mean, it’s not the same. Oh, the lake’s the same and the village, even the appearance of the people. But it’s not the same. They didn’t know me.”

Gehn shook his head. “It’s *fixed*.”

“But my friends. Salar, Koena…”

Gehn stared at he cover of the book a while, hen picked it up and turned toward the fire.

Atrus took a step toward him. “Let *me* fix it. Let me help them.”

Gehn glanced at him contemptuously, then took another step toward the flickering grate.

“Father?”

The muscle beneath Gehn’s right eye twitched. “The book is defective.”

“No!” Atrus made to cross the room and stop him, to wrestle the book from him if necessary, but the desk was between them. Besides, it was already too late. With a tiny little movement, Gehn cast the book into the flames, then stood there, watching, as its pages slowly crackled and curled at the edges, turning black, the symbols burning up one by one, dissolving slowly into ash and nothingness.

Atrus stood there looking on, horrified. But it was too late. The bridge between the Ages was destroyed.

§

In the blue light of the lantern each object in that quiet chamber seemed glazed in ice—each chair and cupboard, the massive wooden bed, the desk. In contrast, the shadows in the room were black, but not just any black, these were intensely black—the empty blackness of nonexistence.

To a casual eye it might have seemed that nothing there was real; that every object trapped within that cold, unfeeling glare was insubstantial—the projection of some dark, malicious deity who, on a moment’s whim, might tear the pages from the book in which all this was written and, with a god’s indifference, banish this all into the shadow.

All that is, but for the young man seated on a chair at the center of it all, the light reflected in his sad, pale eyes.

Slowly Atrus returned to himself, then looked about him. The last few hours were a blank; where he’d been and what he’d done were a complete mystery. All he knew was that he was sitting in his room once more, the lantern lit, his journal open on the desk beside him. He looked, then read what he had written on the left-hand page.

My father is mad.

Remembering, he shuddered, unable to believe what his father had done. And yet the memory was burned into the whiteness of his mind. If he closed his eyes, he could see the pages slowly charring, each one lifted delicately by the flame, as if the fire had read each phrase before consuming it.

Unless, of course, that memory is false, and I, too, am one of my father's "creations"…

But he knew beyond question that that wasn't so. The experience on the Thirty-seventh Age had proved that to him beyond all doubt. Gehn was no god. No. He was simply a man—a weak and foolish man, irresponsible and vain. Yes, and for all his bluster about making D'ni great again, he had forgotten precisely what it was that had made the D'ni extraordinary. The reason why their empire had lasted for so long. It was not their power, nor the fact that they had once ruled a million worlds, it was their restraint, their astonishing humility.

Gehn claimed that he, Atrus, knew nothing, but it wasn't so. He had read the histories of D'ni, and had seen, in those pages, the long struggle of the D'ni elders to suppress the baser side of their nature; to instill in their people the virtues of patience, service, and humility. Yes, and for the best part of sixty thousand years they had succeeded. Until Veovis.

So where did he go from here? What were his options? Should he try to get back to Anna and the cleft? Or should he, perhaps, find a hiding place in the city?

Whatever, he had to go and see Gehn one last time, to say goodbuy. And to tell him, face-to-face, just why he had to leave.

The thought of it disturbed him. He had grown a great deal this last year and was almost the physical equal of his father, yet Gehn still intimidated him.

Even so, it had to be done. He could not simply run away, with his tail between his legs. For if he did, he would be forever in his father's shadow.

He went out, climbing the levels of that dark and twisting house, until he stood there in the library, at the foot of the steps that led up to his father's study. Up there, on the landing, the lantern was still lit, the door still open, as he'd left them.

He went up, steeling himself against his father’s anger, against that mocking laugh that made him feel a little boy again.

But he was no “boy” anymore. He had grown beyond mere boyishness. And now Gehn must be made to recognize that fact—must be forced to acknowledge it once at least before he left his house.

Atrus paused in the doorway, surprised to find the room so dimly lit. The fire had gone out, the lantern on the table faded to the faintest glimmer. As for Gehn, there was no sign.

He turned, taking the landing lantern from its hook, then stepped inside.

Books had been scattered here, there, and everywhere, as if in some fearful rage. And the desk…

Atrus hurried across, setting the lantern down beside the other, then searched among the books stacked on the desk, but there was no sign of his own book. He turned, looking to the fire anxiously, fearing the worst, and almost tripped over his father.

Gehn lay on the floor just behind the desk, sprawled out before the guttered fire.

For a moment Atrus thought his father dead, he was so still. Then he noted a slight movement of Gehn’s right hand and knew that this wasn’t death, only its counterfeit—a kind of stupor brought on by overindulgence with his pipe.

The pipe itself lay to one side, the fire-marble glowing dimly in its chamber. Atrus crouched and picked it up, sniffing the spout then wrinkling up his nose in disgust.

He was about to leave, to turn away and go, when he noticed, just beyond his father’s outstretched hand, the notebook with the tanned leather cover he was always consulting.

For a second or two, he held back, the feeling of *wrongness* strong in him; but then the compulsion to know what was inside the book overcame him and, reaching out, he grasped the notebook then moved back into the lantern’s light.

Taking a long, calming breath, he opened it to the first page, reading what was written there:

The Book of Atrus…

He frowned. Surely that was wrong? Surely it meant…? And then he understood. It didn’t mean him. The handwriting wasn’t his, nor was it

Gehn's. No, this was his grandfather's book. Not Atrus, son of Gehn, but Atrus, father of Gehn.

He read on, then stopped, the last thread that had connected him to his father broken in that instant. Slowly he sat down in Gehn's chair, nodding to himself, a bitter laughter escaping him.

There he'd been, admiring his father, exalting him almost, for his courage, his patience in finding a path through the darkness of the tunnels back to D'ni. And all the while the path had been clearly marked, here in his grandfather's notebook. It wasn't Gehn who had taken the risks, but Gehn's father.

Atrus closed the book and pushed it away from him, then turned, staring at the shadowy figure stretched out on the floor beside his feet.

"Why weren't you what I wanted you to be?" he asked quietly, pained by the great weight of disillusion he was feeling at the moment. "Why did you have to be so…so *small* a man?"

Gehn groaned and stirred slightly, but did not wake.

Atrus sat back, a long, shivering breath escaping him. For a moment longer he stared at Gehn's prone figure, then, his eyes drawn to the lantern, he reached across and picked the notebook up again.

16

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Gehn woke with a pounding head and so many aches that he wondered briefly if he had not perhaps blacked out and fallen. It would not be the first time. Yet it was the first time he had allowed himself such license while Atrus was on K'veer, and he cursed himself for not locking the door before succumbing to that second pipe.

He got up, groaning softly. Aches, yes, but nothing broken.

"No damage done," he said, walking slowly to the door. Then, steadying himself against the landing wall, he looked down the steps, squinting now, his pupils tight, painful.

"Atrus? Atrus, where are you?"

But the library was empty. He went down, then out through the empty chamber, feeling a vague misgiving.

Something had happened. Something…

He stopped, remembering. The boy. He had argued with he boy.
~~~~~~~~~~

Crossing the open space between the library and the upper cabin, he threw open the door and hurried across the unlit chamber, until he stood in the shadowy opening on the far side.

"Atrus?" He waited a moment, then called again. *"A-trus!"*

Nothing. The great mansion was empty.

Unless the boy's asleep…

He hurried down, bursting into Atrus's room without knocking.

"Atrus?"

The bed was empty. He turned, looking to the great carved wardrobe in the corner, then strode across and pulled it open. No. Atrus was not there, and none of his things were there either.

The thought made Gehn blink.

He hurried back to his study and searched the cluttered desk, but the notebook was not there. Reaching down to his right, he pulled out the second drawer and took out the metal box he kept there, placing it on the desk. Then, taking the key from the tiny bunch about his neck, he unlocked it.

He took the single page from he box and, folding it in half, slipped it into his pocket.

Leaving the box where it was, he went over to the door and shouted down the unlit steps. "Rijus! Rijus! Where are you, man?"

Not waiting for the mute, Gehn hurried down through the house. On the final twist of steps, he slowed, then stopped, his suspicions confirmed. He jetty was empty, the boat gone from its mooring.

Gehn slumped down onto the bare stone wall, letting his head fall forward.

"Curse the boy! Curse his ingratitude!"

Gehn lifted his head, the pounding at his temples momentarily making his vision swim. As it cleared, he saw that Rijus was standing on the turn of the steps just above him.

"The boy has gone," Gehn said. "He took the boat. We need to follow him."

The big mute hesitated a moment, taking in what his master had said, then came down the steps and, moving past Gehn, went over to the far side of the cavern. There, in the shadows, a number of boxes were stacked against a wall. Removing them, Rijus exposed an old, unpainted doorway. He looked about him, then stepped over and took down an old

boat hook from the wall. Placing the tip of the hook under the bottom edge of the door, he heaved. The door splintered and fell away.

Gehn stood, then went across.

Inside, in the musty darkness, Rijus was removing an old canvas cover from over something. Gehn blinked, then discerned what it was. It was a boat. An old D'ni craft.

How did you know? He wondered, looking to the mute.

Ignoring the stabbing pains in his head, Gehn stepped inside and helped Rijus haul the ancient boat out onto the jetty.

It was a strangely long and elegant craft, more a canoe than a raft, and, handling it, he realized that it was made of a durable but curiously lightweight stone.

Gehn shook his head, marveling that he had never suspected its existence. It made him wonder what else there was about the mansion that he did not know about.

He looked to Rijus, watching as he attached the ropes, then winched the ancient boat out over the water.

§

Atrus held the lantern up, studying the page a moment longer, then closed the notebook and slipped it back into his tunic pocket.

Left. He had to turn left at the next fork. From there a narrow tunnel led through to a small diamond-shaped cavern with a low shelf of rock to the right, at the far side of which was a series of limestone ledges, leading to a flight of steps.

He walked on, the lantern raised, following the slightly curving tunnel, conscious of the sound of his own footsteps in that confined space.

How many times now had he stopped and listened, thinking he was being followed? And how many times had he heard nothing but the silence of the rock surrounding him?

Ahead now, the tunnel widened, then spilled out into a kind of groin in the rock. There the tunnel split in two. That much, at least, accorded with the diagram in the notebook. Atrus took the left-hand fork, walking on quickly now, his heart pounding again.

If it *was* the diamond-shaped cavern he would rest there a while and get his breath.

And if it wasn’t?

Twice already he had had to retrace his steps, but this time it would mean a long trek back through the tunnels, and he did not relish that at all.

The trouble was that you had too much time down here to think. If he could have walked on thoughtlessly, like a machine, it might have been okay, but as it was he could not help himself imagining all kinds of things.

And the worst of his imaginings was a vivid picture of the cleft, abandoned, choked with sand.

It had been almost four years since he had last seen it. Four years since he had last heard Anna’s voice.

He heard her now.

What do you see, Atrus?

I see rock, grandmother. And tunnels. And darkness. Everywhere I look, darkness.

But her voice did not return. There was only the sound of his own footsteps, going on ahead of him and behind, filling the darkness beyond the lantern’s reach.

§

Atrus looked at the notebook again, turning the page, then turned it back again and frowned. Then, with a tiny start, he felt *between* the pages, locating the torn edge of the missing page, and groaned.

He looked about him, trying to remember—to retrieve from memory the path he’d taken all those years ago. Had he descended into the cavern or had he come up into it?

If he chose wrongly he would be lost.

And if he chose correctly?

Then, judging by the other pages, he would face the same kind of choice another five, maybe six times before he could be sure he was back on course. Before he reached the safety of the next page.

He swallowed bitterly, wondering just when his father had torn the page from the book, then looked up.

“So you thought you would make a journey, did you?”

Atrus froze, then slowly turned, facing his father, noting at once the cloth wrapped about his boots.

“I thought it time I kept my promise to my grandmother.”

“Your promise?” Gehn laughed humorlessly. “What of your promise to me? Besides, I think you have something that belongs to me and I mean to have it back.”

“Then you’ll have to take it from me.”

“I see.” Gehn half turned, gesturing to Rijus, who stepped from the shadows just behind him.

At the sight of the mute, Atrus realized that he stood no chance. If it had just been his father, he might—just might—have got the better of him, but he knew the mute’s strength of old. Why, he’d seen the man lift heavy rocks—rocks he himself could barely budge—and throw them out of the way.

Atrus moved quickly. Taking the notebook from his pocket, he threw it high into the air, then, casting his lantern away, turned and ran, climbing the rock face like an ape before vanishing into the tunnel.

He heard his father’s cry—of anger and frustration—and knew that Gehn had not expected that. Gehn had thought he would come quietly, just as he’d always done in the past. But the past was the past. He knew now that he could not stay with the man, even if it meant losing himself here in the depths of the earth.

He went quickly, his right hand keeping contact with the tunnel wall. Then, unexpectedly, the tunnel dipped and, with a cry, he found himself tumbling head over heels, coming to a jolting halt against a wall.

He lay there a moment, stunned, listening to his father’s shouts.

“Atrus! *Atrus!* Come back here, boy!”

Atrus groaned and sat up. For a moment he blinked at he darkness, wondering which way he was facing now, then saw, distant yet unmistakable, the glow of a lantern above him and to his right, at the head of the tunnel.

He had to go on. On into the darkness.

Pulling himself up, he stumbled on, making his way down as quickly as he dared, away from the approaching light.

And now, strangely, it came to him. He remembered where he was. If he closed his eyes he could see it vividly. Just ahead the path branched to the right, then climbed. Where it opened out there was a broad ledge of rock and, beyond that, a gap—a narrow chasm—straddled by a tiny rope bridge. If he could get to that, then maybe he had a chance. Maybe he

could hold them off somehow, or find a way of destroying the bridge so that they could not pursue him.

Feeling a faint breeze coming from his right, Atrus stopped and turned, searching with both hands until he found the entrance. As he'd thought, the tunnel went sharply upward, forcing him to scramble up on his hands and knees, his head bent forward. There was a faint light up ahead, and as he came out of the narrow tunnel, he saw that he was precisely where he'd thought he'd be.

Only the ledge was brightly lit, a lantern standing off to one side, while ahead…

Atrus groaned. Once more his father had anticipated him. Once more, Gehn had had the final laugh.

The rope bridge was gone, the four metal pins jutting up nakedly from the rock.

He went across and stood there, looking down into the chasm. It was too deep, the jump too great. Or was it?

Atrus turned, hearing noises in the tunnel behind him. There was a flicker of light, growing stronger by the second. In a moment they would be upon him.

He turned back, staring at the chasm. It was now or never. Stepping back, he took a deep breath, then ran at it, hurling himself across the gap.

"Atrus!"

His chest slammed against the edge of the rock, winding him. Yet even as he began to slide, his right hand reached out and grasped one of the metal pins.

He spun about, his shoulder thudding against the rock, his right arm almost pulled from its socket as he held on for dear life. Yet he could feel the strength draining from his fingers; could feel them slowly slipping, the sweat from his palms sliding on the metal.

And then a shadow passed over the top of him. There was a deep grunt and then something gripped his upper arm and began to lift him slowly up.

Surprised by the strength of that grip, Atrus turned his head, expecting to see Rijus, but it was Gehn who stared back at him, a sullen anger in those pale eyes.

"Acch, boy!" he said, his fingers pinching mercilessly into Atrus's flesh as they hauled him inch by inch to safety. "Did you really think you

could outjump me?”

17

~~~~~~~~~~

Atrus stood there a long time after his father had gone, staring at the shadowed door in shock.

He turned, looking across that huge, high-ceilinged space toward the desk. There lay the Age five book.

A trap, he thought. Another door he’ll hope I’ll walk through. And when I do…

Atrus heard again the slam of the door as his father closed it on him.

He stepped out from beneath the great curved arch, the pinkish light of the lamp above giving his features a false glow of health. Beneath his feet alternating black and white tiles—circles on squares—stretched away to every corner of that great space, while a large mosaic at the center portrayed Ri’Neref, the most famous of all the Grand Masters of the Build, his graybearded features somber, almost melancholic as he stared back across the ages.

The stone, once polished and beautiful, was webbed with tiny cracks, worn with age.

A prison, Atrus thought, recognizing it for what it really was.

The stone here was not the lavatic black used elsewhere in the house, but a dull metallic gray carved with intricate patterns, like lacework, great bulbous pillars holding up the massive arch of the roof. He had seen that same stone in some of the most ancient structures in the city and realized that this was probably the oldest part of the house.

How old? He wondered. *Ten? Twenty thousand years? Or older yet?* It was hard to tell. The D’ni had built for eternity, not knowing that their days were numbered.

Finally, in the northern corner of the chamber, beneath a massive arch, stood the locked doorway that led out of his prison, bloodred stone pillars standing like sentries to either side.

Remembering what his father had said about the D’ni love of secret passages, of doors in solid walls and tunnels through the rock, he began a search.
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Slowly, patiently, he went from arch to arch, searching each of the massive alcoves carefully, his fingers covering every inch of stone, as high as he could reach right down to the floor.

It took the best part of two hours, and though he found no secret doors or passages, it was still well worth the effort. In the floor of one of the more shadowy recesses, half embedded in the unfinished stone, he found a D'ni stonecutter. It was a big old machine, like a massive crouching spider, and its power source was long exhausted, yet one of the cutting blades was as good as new.

At first Atrus thought he might have to leave it there, it was so firmly wedged into the rock, but after half an hour rocking it back and fort, he freed it from the stone.

He lifted the heavy cutter, feeling its weight, then nodded to himself. The door was solid metal and he would get nowhere trying to break through it, not even with this, but if he could chip away at the rock to either side, then maybe he wouldn't need to.

Knowing there was no sense in delaying, he set to work at once. Taking off his top, he wrapped the cloth about the main body of the cutter, then went across and, kneeling in the deep shadow beside the door, began to attack the stone, low down and to his left.

He could not properly see what he was doing, but after ten minutes he stopped and, setting the cutter aside, checked with his fingers.

It wasn't much of a notch, considering—in fact, he had barely chipped away more than a few flakes of the iron-tough stone—but at the top of that tiny, uneven depression the stone had split.

He traced the crack with his forefinger, then grinned. It was more than a foot long.

Atrus turned, looking toward the desk. There was a lamp there and fire-marbles. Hurrying across, he brought them back and, placing the lamp to one side so that it threw its light over the door, set to work again, aiming each blow at that split, aiming to widen it and crack the stone.

The first few blows did nothing. Then, with a sharp cracking noise, the split widened dramatically.

Atrus smiled and lifted the cutter again, meaning to extend the fissure, but even as he did, the heard the rock above him creak and groan.

He looked up. In the light from the lantern he could see that the roof directly above him was badly cracked. Even as he looked, tiny

splinters of rock began to fall, as those cracks widened.

Snatching up the lantern, Atrus scampered backward. And not a second too soon. With a great sigh, the two pillars collapsed inwardly and a huge section of the roof caved in with a great crash.

Atrus lay on his back, some dozen paces off, staring back at the great pile of rock that had fallen, the dust in the air making him cough violently. As the dust slowly settled, he saw that the door was totally blocked. He edged back, then got to his feet, sneezing and rubbing at his eyes. Now he'd done it! Now he was trapped here for sure!

He coughed again, trying to clear his throat, then moved farther away, his eyes watering now.

Trapped, yes, but at least there was one advantage to it. If he could not get out, then Gehn could not get in.

Atrus turned, looking to the Age Five book, and blinked, reassessing the situation.

So just what did Gehn want? And why, if this *was* a prison, had he provided him with the means to escape—the book? Why give him pen and ink? And why provide him with a Linking Book from the Fifth Age back to this chamber?

A trap, he thought again. But now he wasn't quite so sure. Maybe his father had given him the book simply so he wouldn't starve.

That thought intrigued him. He went over to the desk and stood there, staring down at the Age five book. At the very center of its cover was a circular metal medallion, fixed to the leather by five tiny tacks. The D'ni number five—a square halved by a narrow bar—was raised in metal above the porcelain base, on which was engraved an intricate floral pattern.

Atrus opened the book and looked at the descriptive panel.

From the distant image it seemed a pleasant, peaceful place, the island heavily wooded.

Yes. But what's the catch?

For there had to be a catch. He knew that now. If he had learned one single thing today it was that Gehn never—never—did anything without some self-serving reason.

§

It was many hours before he finally decided to venture into Gehn's Fifth Age, deciding, before he did, that he would read it first, for if it really was a prison, he should at least know beforehand what kind of Age he was to end his days in.

For several hours he sat there, slowly leafing through the pages, noting all the flaws, all the possible contradictions that Gehn's particular writing style threw up. More than ever, he could see his father's limited vision on every page, like a hideous tapestry quilted together from exquisite patches of silk. The entire work was shortsighted and disjointed and yet it was also, paradoxically, quite clever. Surprisingly so.

Even so, it was one single thing which, in the end, caught Atrus's imagination; one element which made him catch his breath and make him want to go and *see*.

The tree.

Atrus sat back, amazed b the elegance, the sheer economy, of the D'ni phrases that had described it, then leaned forward again, tracing each symbol with his finger, a thrill of pure aesthetic delight passing through him.

A tree. A giant tree, whose topmost branches speared the sky!

Atrus smiled at the thought, then read on, memorizing the details of the world, fixing them in his mind like the symbols on a map.

And if it *was* a trap?

He looked about him at the huge and gloomy chamber. Even if it was a trap, at least he would get to see the sun again. At least he would feel he wind upon his skin, the rain falling on his arms and upturned face, the sweet and gentle pleasure of birdsong.

For a moment he looked down, his face creased with pain at the memory of Salar and the old woman, recalling what had happened to their world.

Never again, he swore, picking up the Linking Book, then opening the Age Five book to its descriptive page.

Hesitating no longer, Atrus placed his hand against the image on the page. At once he felt the page expand…

§

He had linked into a dense copse of tall, bearded grass which grew beside a circular pool that bulged strangely. He had stared at it, fascinated by the apparent motion of its convex surface, then, hearing voices, had hurried from the spot quickly, making his way over a lightly wooded hill, then along a narrow dirt path that led steeply down a sheer cliff wall, dropping beneath an overhang of rock and down onto a rocky beach. An azure ocean lapped gently against the shore, washing over a line of smooth tapered rocks that edged the beach like the teeth of some great submerged creature.

There he paused, getting his breath, listening to the gentle slush and hiss of the sea.

Turning, he looked about him, searching for somewhere safe to hide the Linking Book he'd brought. Almost at once his gaze fell on the sandstone cliff beneath the overhang, the face of which was pocked with hundreds of tiny holes.

Atrus walked across and, choosing from among a number of likely candidates, picked one of the larger ones, some way up, well above what he saw was the normal tidal level. He glanced about him, then, convinced no one was watching, climbed up, using the lips of other holes as footholds. Squeezing his whole body into the narrow space, he crawled a little way along then set the Linking Book down on the dry ledge—wedging it with a loose rock so that it wouldn't slide.

Satisfied, he backed out, then jumped down onto the sand again, wiping his hands against his sides.

He had noticed a sloping path around the edge of the enclosed bay, over to his left, and headed there now, picking his way slowly p the jumble of rock. For a moment he was in shadow, the rock ledge blocking his view of the sky, then, as the path turned slightly, there was a break in the rock and he came out into a sloping meadow.

It was surprisingly windy. A strong, gusting breeze bent the heads of the long grass stalks and tugged at his cloak. Pulling it tight about him, Atrus walked on, head down, then, noticing how the shadow ended in a jagged line just ahead of him, he looked up.

Slowly, very slowly, he turned to his right, until he was facing it, his mouth fallen open in astonishment, his head going back to try to take it all in.

The tree.

It seemed to rest on a peninsula of rock, its roots like the pillars of some huge stone temple, reaching down the cliff face to pierce the rocky beach, great humps of root, like the slick backs of a dozen massive sea serpents, stretching out into the ocean.

Its trunk, likewise, was monumental. It was not by any means as tall as Atrus had imagined, yet the sheer breadth of it was enough to make him feel not simply small in its presence but insignificant.

Like Time itself, Atrus thought, letting his eyes slowly climb its branches. Then, realizing how exposed he was to watchful eyes, he hurried on, making for the rock face just ahead.

A set of steps were cut into rock, leading up through the trees. And there, in a clearing, the sunlight filtering down upon it through the treetops, was a large wooden hut.

Atrus walked up to it, his heart hammering in his chest, recognizing it at once. It was like he meeting hut—Gehn's temple—on the Thirty-seventh Age. Almost identical, in fact.

Seeing it, Atrus knew suddenly exactly where he was on the island, picturing it in his mind as on a map.

He stepped up, into the cool interior, passing between he painted wooden poles and into a space that was furnished in the most luxurious manner imaginable, with marvelous tapestries and statuary and silver-poled banners lining the walls.

At the far side of that shadowed space was a throne—a massive thing that looked as though it had been cast from a single piece of glowing gold. Coming closer, however, Atrus saw that it wasn't gold but a beautiful, tawny stone, the like of which he'd never seen, even in D'ni. Atrus stopped briefly to examine it, brushing his fingertips over the smooth, cool surface of the arm, wondering in which ancient book Gehn had found the formula or phrase to produce such a wondrous material.

Behind the throne was a large free-standing screen, on the pale lemon silk of which was embroidered the silhouette of a man. That silhouette, with its high, domed head and its familiar lenses, was unmistakable. It was Gehn.

Atrus nodded to himself at this evidence of Gehn's presence. On how many other worlds had his father built such temples? In how many Ages was that man a "god?"

Knowing now what he would find—recalling all of this vividly from the Age Five book—he went over to the screen and looked around it. There was a shadowy space beyond, a narrow set of steps leading down.

He went down, into the darkness.

A low door, cut crudely from the rock, led to a long but narrow cave. From what he'd read, he knew that farther back, the walls were pocked with thousands upon thousands of tiny holes in much the same manner as the cliff face.

It's there! he realized, peering through the half light. *Gehn's Linking Book is there!*

He was about to turn away, to go back through the temple and explore the wood surrounding it, when he remembered that the cave actually led somewhere. He couldn't recall exactly what it led to-there had been several areas in the Age Five book where Gehn's phrasing was unclear, and this was one of them—but he had a definite recollection that it was important somehow.

He walked on. The warm stuffiness of the cave was making him sweat, yet the cave was definitely leading somewhere. He might be imagining it, but just as the air grew constantly warmer, so there seemed to be a faint, shimmering blue light in the tunnel now, enough to allow him to see a couple of feet in front of him. As he went on, the light grew, until he found himself in a second, smaller cave, filled with that same shimmering blue light.

It was hot in the second cave, unbearably hot, steam rising from a great vent in the floor, but Atrus's eyes were drawn upward, into the roof of the cave. There, the most astonishing sight met his gaze. The flat gray rock of the ceiling was pierced at its center by a large, roughly circular hole, perhaps eight or ten feet in diameter. Within that hole, suspended *above* the cave, was a pool of water, its gently shimmering surface flush with the rock surrounding it. Beside it stood a metal ladder, leading up into the pool.

Atrus stared, openmouthed. It was an illusion. It had to be. Yet if that were so, what power sustained it? He frowned, willing himself to understand. He walked across and stared. The massive, natural vent glowed redly far below.

He looked up into the pool. Sunlight was filtering down through the water, the curved walls of which seemed to form a kind of well. He

narrowed his eyes, trying to estimate its length, but it was difficult to tell. He knew, from his reading, that the refractive quality of water could distort such things. Besides, who knew even if this *was* water, for when had he ever seen water behave in such a fashion? Up there, on the far side of that unnatural barrier, however, there was something. There had to be. Or why the ladder?

Atrus stepped over the the ladder, taking hold of it determinedly.

How far is it? he wondered, pausing, his head only inches beneath that strangely quivering surface. *Twenty feet? Thirty?*

Raising his right hand, he tentatively immersed it in the pool.

It was extremely warm and felt like water, except that, when he withdrew his hand, the drips flew upward, merging with the pellucid surface of the pool.

Atrus closed his eyes, then pushed up, immersing his head and shoulders. For five full seconds he held himself there, then ducked down again, sputtering.

There, he told himself, opening his eyes wide and drawing a hand back through his sodden hair, grinning to himself.

He closed his eyes again and counted, taking slow, calming breaths. At twenty he thrust upward, dragging himself up the last few feet of the ladder with his hands. And then, suddenly, he was fully immersed!

Opening his eyes, he let go of the ladder and kicked, reaching up instinctively, trying to claw his way to the surface.

Slowly, very slowly it came toward him, the walls sliding past. His lungs were aching now, but he was very nearly there.

And then, suddenly, there was a shadow on the sunlit surface just above him, the outline of a human figure. He tried to hold back, putting out his arms, trying to slow his upward drift, fighting to stay where he was, but it was impossible, and in the struggle something gave.

The sudden choking pain was awful. It was like swallowing hot tar. His lungs were suddenly on fire, his mind flaring like a bonfire with the pain. He spasmed and threw his arms out, trying to grasp the edges of that strange, unnatural well, yet even as he did, the blackness leaked in again, robbing him of consciousness.

Slowly, arms out, he floated to the surface of the circular pool he had seen when he first arrived.

§

The hut was dark after the bright sunlight of the bay, and as Katran sat herself in the corner, out of the way of her two cousins who were tending to the stranger, it took a while for her eyes to adjust to the shadows.

At first they had thought he was dead. It was the strangest thing they had ever seen. They were reluctant to take him from the water. His flesh was pale and corpselike and there he been no pulse at his neck. The old man, Hrea, had advocated throwing him back into the water, but her eldest cousin, Carel, had persevered, pushing the water from out of the stranger's chest and breathing his own air into the youth's blue mouth until, with a choking sound and the expulsion of a plentiful amount of water, the corpse had begun to breath again.

They had wrapped the stranger in a blanket then carried him back to the hut.

That had been this morning. In the hours between the stranger had slept, at first lightly, feverishly, but then peacefully. For the last few hours Carel and his younger brother, Erlar, waited for the stranger to wake.

"How long?" she asked impatiently, the D'ni she spoke clearer, less accented than theirs.

Carel, who was standing beside the bed, looked to her across the full length of the room and shrugged, but Erlar, who was at the stove, preparing a pot of soup, smiled and said gently, "Not long now, Katran. Let him sleep a little longer. If he doesn't come around soon, we'll wake him."

"Is there any…*damage?*"

At that Erlar looked to Carel.

"It's hard to say," Carel answered.

"Who is he?" she asked, posing the question that all of them had asked in their minds. "Do you think he belongs to Gehn?"

"One of his servants, you mean?" Carel sighed, then shrugged. "I don't know. He has a pair of eye instruments like Gehn's."

"*Eye instruments?*" She sat forward slightly. "I didn't see them."

"No…they were in the pocket of his cloak." Carel reached across and took them from a table beside the bed. "Here."

She took them and studied them, remembering what she'd been told by Erlar about the stranger's first appearance among them—unearthly

white, his arms spread as if to embrace them as they knelt there looking down.

Katran studied the lenses a moment longer, then handed them back. “Is he marked?”

Carel shook his head. “There’s nothing on his neck.”

Unconscious of the gesture, she put her hand to her own neck, her fingers tracing the boxlike symbol imprinted in the flesh.

“Then maybe…”

Both cousins looked to her, waiting for her to go on, but she merely shook her head.

Erlar smiled, then looked back at the pot he was stiring. “He was talking in his sleep earlier…”

“Talking?” Katran stared at her cousin, her deeply green eyes intent.

“He was murmuring something about flowers.”

Her narrow mouth opened, the lips barely parting, then she turned her head, anxiously looking across to where the stranger lay on his back on the wooden bed.

There was a faint groan, a movement of the body. Katran half stood, then sat again. Carel, beside the body, reached down and, dipping the flannel in the bucket by his side, wrung it out, then began to wipe the stranger’s brow, as he’d done now many times. Yet even as he did, the youth’s hand came up and firmly held his wrist.

Carel swallowed nervously as the young man opened his eyes.

There was surprise in those pale yet clearly human eyes; fear and curiosity.

“Where am I?”

Carel made no attempt to free his hand. “You are on Riven. In the village.”

“Riven?”

“Yes, Riven,” Carel repeated, that one word sounding strange among the heavily accented D’ni words. “We found you in the pool. You were in a bad way. The water had got inside you.”

The young man’s eyes opened wide, suddenly remembering. “The pool…”

“Are you hungry?”

“Hungry?” The stranger nodded. “Famished!”

“Good…” Carel looked to his younger brother and gave a nod. At the signal, Erlar poured soup into a large wooden vessel and, after sprinkling a measure of dark powder into it, carried it across.

“Here,” Erlar said, holding it out, as Carel helped the young man sit up, placing two pillows behind his back, between him and the wooden headboard.

“Thank you,” the stranger said, taking the bowl. After sniffing it, he began to spoon it into his mouth, slowly at first, then with an appetite that made the brothers look to each other and smile.

“Would you like some more?” Erlar asked, taking the empty bowl back from him.

“Please.”

They watched, astonished, as he ate a second bowl and then a third. Then, drowsy once more, he effort, it seemed, too much for him, he slept again.

And all the while Katran sat there in the corner, her green eyes watching.

§

Atrus woke with a start, as if he’d fallen in his sleep, conscious of the unfamiliar yet not unpleasant smell of the shadowed place in which he found himself.

Turning onto his side, he stretched, then lay still, hearing voices from outside. He remembered now: the two young men who’d sat there while he ate, smiling kindly at him. He smiled himself at the thought. What had they called this place? Riven, that was it. Gehn’s Fifth Age.

He yawned, then lay still again, staring at the far wall. It was a simple mud and daub hut, not so dissimilar from those on the Thirty-seventh Age, but bigger, and with a finish to the walls that spoke of a high level of technical skill. And they had stoves, too—cast metal stoves on which they cooked. That spoke of complexities to this Age that Age Thirty-seven did not have. They would have to have a supply of metal, yes, and the skills to use it.

His eyes went to the stove, noting its simple, unadorned shape, so unlike all of the D’ni artifacts he was used to. Such simplicity appealed to him.

Idly, his eyes traveled upward, searching the shadows of the ceiling, curious to see what kind of structure this was, what materials they used here. So much of this, as ever, had not been in the descriptive book. Only the building blocks were there in Gehn's Age Five book: the basic elements from which the complexities of such cultures developed. That thought fascinated him. It made him think of subtle ways he himself might have influenced the mix, what factors he personally would have built into the equation of this Age.

His eyes traveled down from the shadows, noting the simple squarecut window, the undecorated plainness of the whitewashed wall, then stopped, surprised to find the eyes of a young woman staring back at him.

Green eyes. Startlingly green eyes.

For a moment he simply stared, his lips slightly parted, taking in the strange, almost delicate beauty of her face; then, realizing what he was doing, he averted his eyes, suddenly, acutely embarrassed.

How long has she been there? he wondered. How long has she been watching me?

He heard her soft footsteps on the bare earth floor.

"You almost died," she said. "what were you doing in the pool?"

Atrus turned to find her kneeling beside the bed, her face almost on a level with his own. He found that strangley disconcerting, as if she were some kind of threat to him. Unlike the young men who had nursed him, her face was tense, almost ill-humored.

"I don't know," he answered.

She blinked, then looked away, allowing Atrus the chance to study her. The others had been tanned, and so was she, but he noticed that the skin of her lower arms was strangely "banded"—pale and tanned—as if she had at some point placed strips of cloth about them to create that pattern. She was wearing a simple dark green dress. There were tiny white feathers braided into her hair and about her neck was a wide, embroidered choker, but his gaze kept returning to her eyes, which were deep and mysterious, so deep and dark…

"Where did you come from?" she asked, her face still turned from his.

"Another place," he said, thinking that it could do no harm, but he could see that his answer didn't satisfy her. There was a flash of irritation

in her eyes.

Atrus sensed as much, as she stood and turned away from him. He risked a tiny glance. There was something tense about the way she stood there, he head slightly tilted forward, her hands up to her mouth.

She turned back, focusing those dark eyes on him once again. “What’s your name?”

“Atrus. What’s yours?”

“Katran.”

He nodded. “Catherine. That’s…”

“Ka-*tran*,” she said again, placing the emphasis on the final syllable. “I dreamed of you.”

“You dreamed…?”

Then, without another word, she turned and quickly left the hut, leaving the door wide open, the sunlight spilling in in a wide bar of gold that climbed the far wall.

Atrus lifted his head, staring at the doorway, wondering what all that had been about, then, swallowing, his throat strangely dry, he let his head fall back.

18

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Atrus sat cross-legged beside the shallow bowl, his eyes closed, his fist clenched tightly, counting.

“Atrus?”

He turned, looking up at her. “Yes, Catherine?”

There was a slight flicker of annoyance in her face at the mispronumciation of her name, but she had given up trying to correct him. “What are you doing?”

At the count of sixty he relaxed his hand, letting the fingers unfold. As he did, a small bubble of water, its surface fluid and feflective like a drop of mercury, floated up out of his palm.

Atrus looked to her. She had a slightly quizzical look on her face.

“Water shouldn’t do that when it gets warm.”

“No? Then what should water do?”

Atrus shrugged. “Well, it shouldn’t *float* and it shouldn’t give me a *stomache ache.”*
~~~~~~~~~~

She laughed, then quickly grew serious again.

Atrus stared at her, surprised. It was the first time she had laughed since he had met her, and the change it made to her face was quite remarkable.

“I’ll get you some of the powder.”

“Powder?”

Catherine gave a single nod. For a moment she simply stared, as if trying to fathom something about him, then, without even the slightest movement, she seemed to shrug and look away.

Her eyes were still on him, but she was no longer there. Not looking out at him, anyway. It was as if, briefly, she had gone into a trance.

Atrus reached out and picked up the brass cooking pot he had been examining earlier, pleased by its symmetry, by the way the double pans—top and bottom linked by four strong brass spindles—like all the cooking implements in Age Five, were designed to cope with water which, when heated, rose into the air. Everything here had special “catchment lids” and spouts with tiny valves which did not open unless you tilted the thing a certain way.

He looked to Catherine again, and saw she was still distracted.

“What are you thinking?”

She turned to face him. “I’ll tell you what I’m thinking. You have those pale eyes and wear those strange eye instruments. What have you to do with Lord Gehn?”

“I am Atrus, his son.”

There was a brief look of triumph in her eyes. Then, as if she suddenly saw what it meant, she took a step backward. “So what do you want?”

He paused as he considered the question—sweeping away the cloud of Gehn and all he’d witnessed over the last few years.

What do I want?

“I want to go home,” he said softly.

“Home?”

“To the cleft.”

“The cleft?”

“It’s where I was born,” he said. “Where I grew up. It was just a crack, a hole in the earth surrounded by desert,” he added, thinking of what Gehn had said of it, “yet it was like…well, like *paradise*.”

“And your father lived there with you?”

Atrus shook his head, looking away has he answered her. “No. I didn’t know my father. Not until I was fourteen. I grew up with my grandmother, Anna. She fed me, clothed me, taught me. She gave me everything.”

Catherine stared at him intensely.

“And then your father came?”

Atrus nodded. Standing, he brushed himself down, then looked past her down the grassy slope. The village was in the crater behind him, just the other side of the slope—literally *in* the crater, the mud and daub huts fixed into the crater wall using great wooden stakes, like the rooms in the cleft had been.

He smiled, remembering. The first time he had seen it had almost been his last. Feigning sleep, he had let the elder of the two brothers, Carel, leave the hut, then had slipped out of bed, intending to go outside and look around. It had only been his natural caution that had stopped him falling into the bay fifty feet below.

It also explained why the sounds changed in the evening. He had thought that the sea came in to a beach close by the hut; he had not understood that it actually came in *beneath* the hut, let in through a tunnel inlet to the left of the cliffside village.

He turned, looking about him. To the left, no more than half a mile distant, lay the forest, its strange, golden-leaved trees dominating the view there, their massive branches flattened, as if under enormous pressure from the sky.

Directly south, on a raised promontory, was the copse in which the temple stood, while over to the right, clearly visible from wherever one stood on the island, was the tree.

Catherine stepped up beside him, her eyes on him all the while, almost as if she knew him. Her tone was different now…Steady.

“I had a dream of you.”

He turned to face her, recalling the first time she had said it to him, in the hut. “A dream?”

“Yes,” she said, slowly walking down the slope away from him, her green dress flowing about her, her bare feet seeming almost to float upon the grass. “I dreamed of a dead man floating in the pool, and now you’re here!”

§

“Well?” Gehn asked, sitting down in front of the young woman. “Has anything…*unusual* been happening?”

Katran looked up from the copybook and met her Master’s gaze, her own eyes innocent. “Nothing unusual.”

“Good,” he said, turning away, sucking deeply on his pipe. “Shall we pick up where we left off?”

The lesson went well, but then they always did. Katran was a good student—his best—and he never had to tell her anything more than once. Some of the other Guild members were good at copying, but none of them, with the exception of Katran, had begun to grasp the true meaning of the symbols they were copying. She, by contrast, had understood at once. And now, after only two years’ tuition, she was almost fluent. *Almost*, he thought, thinking of all the key words he had kept from her; certain garo-hertee words, without which it would be impossible to write. But soon he would begin to give her those keys. One by one. If she was good.

He had formulated his plan long before he had imprisoned Atrus. Furious with his son, but determined to fulfill his dream of a great D’ni resurgence, he had found himself wondering if it were not possible to go about things in a different manner. He still needed Atrus—there was no doubt of that, for such talent should not be squandered—yet it seemed impossible to work with him.

But did it have to be Atrus at his side? Wouldn’t another do just as well? Someone not quite as talented, perhaps—yet certainly more docile than his son? Someone he could control much easier than Atrus?

At once he had thought of Katran.

Gehn smiled and turned to face her, setting his pipe down on the desk. “There’s something I have to tell you, Katran. Something important.”

“Master?” She stared back at him, intent yet obedient, her eyes the eyes of the perfect acolyte, the perfect servant.

“I want you to prepare yourself. There is to be a wedding, you understand? Thirty days from now. I will give instructions to the other Build members as to the ceremony, but you must make special preparations.”

“You are to take a bride, Master?”

“Yes, Katran,” he said, looking at her fondly now. “You are to be my wife. You will sit at my right hand and rule a thousand worlds with me.”

“But Master,” she said, bowing her head, “I am not deserving of this honor.”

Gehn laughed softly, pleased by her humility. “Maybe not. But I have chosen you, Katran, and you will prepare yourself. Thirty days, you have. Thirty days…and then the ceremony will take place.”

§

Atrus had been looking for Catherine all over the main island, surprised that on one knew where she had gone. Then, suddenly, she was there again, standing among the trees at the edge of the forest.

He almost called to her, almost shouted out her name, yet something about the way she was standing there—distracted—made him stop and then double back into the wood, coming out behind her, one of the massive spongy boles hiding him from her sight.

In the mottled shade of the massive branches, he slender figure seemed unreal—a thing of earth and grass, the green of her cloak, the raven black of her hair blending with the surrounding shadows.

Even from where he was standing, Atrus could see that something had disturbed her. Her eyes, which were normally so bright and inquisitive, were now deep in thought, while her hands were clasped tightly in front of her.

What is it? he asked silently, feeling a natural sympathy for her.

Slowly, his feet carefully finding their way over the thick leaf cover between the trees, he moved toward her, until he stood less than a dozen feet away.

“Catherine?”

She did not turn, merely looked up.

“Catherine…are you all right?”

She nodded.

“Shall I walk you back to the village?”

“All right,” she said quietly, turning and walking beside him as they moved out from beneath the great overhand of branches into the

sloping meadow.

§

Atrus found his linking book where he'd left it in the cliff face and linked back.

The chamber was as he'd left it, the Age Five book open on the desk, the ink pots and pen undisturbed.

Returning to the desk, Atrus settled in the chair, then drew the book toward him and began to read it, more carefully this time, seeing how each phrase, each small description, contributed to the totality of what he'd seen.

Now that he had been there, he understood just how good it really was. The Fifth Age of Gehn was quite remarkable. Yet there were clear flaws in the way the book had been put together, particularly in the structure of the writing. Elegant passages lay side by side on the page, each uniquely beautiful, yet disturbingly unrelated to each other. It was the trademark of his father's style. The boldness of Gehn's eclecticism—his drawing from such disparate sources—was indeed astonishing, close to brilliant.

Had Gehn built his Ages from structural principles, they might have been different, for it was possible that in so doing he might have reconciled the gaps. As it was, his method was piecemeal and the flaws that resulted quickly compounded into a complex network of interrelated faults—faults that could not be tackled by simple solutions.

Atrus turned the final page, nodding to himself as he read the last few entries—seeing there his father's crude attempts to make small changes to the Age Five world, to stabilize its inherent faults.

"All wrong," he said quietly, wishing he could just score out those final entries, but, remembering what had happened on the Thirty-seventh Age, fearing to do so. No, if he was to make changes, he would do so only with great care and after long and patient deliberation. One could not meddle with an Age. At least, not with an Age as complex as Gehn's Fifth Age.

Riven, he thought. *She called it Riven.* And as he looked up, it was to find Catherine standing there, looking down at him, a large blue book clutched to her chest.

19

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Atrus stood there, staring at Catherine, stunned by her sudden appearance.

She quickly looked around her, then set the book down on the table. “I followed you,” she said, before he could speak. “Saw where you hid your Linking Book.”

He glanced at the big, blue-covered book where it lay on the table between them, then pointed to it.

“I got it,” she said, “from your father.”

“Got it? How? He doesn’t allow books out of his library.”

She looked directly at him. “I stole it from his study, while he was asleep.”

He stared at her openmouthed. “But why?”

Things were moving far too fast for him. He stood, putting his hands out, as if to fend her off. “Slow down. What were you doing in my father’s study?”

“He takes us there.”

“Who?”

“The Guild. He has us copy things from books. He says it saves him time.”

“The Guild?” He laughed. In his mind he saw again how mad his father was, trying to re-create the D’ni Guilds.

She stepped around the desk and, reaching out, pulled down the edge of the choker she was wearing. Beneath it, burned into the flesh, was his father’s sign.

He met her eyes. “How long ago was this?”

She made a face, as if she hated to recall it. “He placed the mark on me four years ago. I was the fourth to have it. Since then he’s increased our number to ten. We are an elite. The other islanders have to do as we say. Your father insists on it.”

“So why bring me the book?” he asked, laying his hand on the flecked blue cover.

“You can write. I want you to fix our world.”
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Atrus stared back at her a moment, then went around the desk and sat, opening the book. It was blank. She had stolen a blank book. He looked up at her. “Why should I do that?”

“Because you must.”

“*Must?* Who says I must?”

“Don’t you understand? It’s falling apart. I’m asking for your help.”

Atrus sat back. “Go on.”

“It’s been happening for a while now. There have been small tremors in the earth, and cracks, and schools of dead fish have been floating into the bay. And then the tree…”

He waited, his stomach muscles tensed, remembering what had happened on the Thirty-seventh Age. There, too, it had begun with little things. Instability: there was a fatal instability in all his father’s worlds.

“The great tree is dying,” she said.

“Why didn’t you say this to me earlier?”

“Because I wasn’t sure of you at first.”

“Why?” he laughed.

“Because of your power. The power that your father has. The power to create and destroy worlds.”

“You think I have that power?”

“Haven’t you?”

He hesitated, then nodded. “I can write.”

“Then help us, Atrus.”

He let out a long, sighing breath. What if this were another trap? After all, how likely was it that she had managed to steal books from his father’s study? Then again, he remembered the voice he’d heard that time, when he’d been standing at the bottom of the steps that led up to Gehn’s study. He should have known, even then, that Gehn was bringing people back from his Ages.

“Okay,” he said. “I’ll help you.” He paused. “But I need more books. More blank books.”

“Why?”

He studied her momentarily. “There are things I have to try out. Experiments.”

“I have more books on Riven. You’ll need to help me carry them.”

“You’ve…” He laughed. “You mean, you stole more than one?”

“Yes. Your father trusts me. He…”

“What is it?” he asked.

“Nothing. Just that we’d better be getting back, to pick up he books. The quicker you get to work…”

He shook his head. “Why are you in such a hurry? It can’t be rushed. To fix an Age…”

She leaned closer. “There’re only thirty days.”

Atrus sat back. “I don’t understand. What’s happening in thirty days?”

But Catherine did not answer him. Instead she reached across and, placing her hand over the Age Five image on the page, linked back, leaving Atrus staring at the empty air, openmouthed, his heart pounding in his chest.

§

He linked back to the grassy plateau beside the pool.

Catherine was waiting for him. Taking his hand, she hurried him through the trees and along the edge of the cliff top opposite the tree. Water lapped softly at the rocks a hundred feet below. Looking at the tree across that narrow gap, Atrus could see little wrong with it. From this distance it seemed the epitome of rude health, a vast symbol of natural fecundity, yet he had no reason to doubt Catherine.

“It would be best if we were not seen,” she said, hurrying him down a narrow path that hugged the cliff, then up a curving twist of wooden steps set into the earth between steep slopes of grass.

He shrugged, then went on with her, up the final few feet of the path and onto a lush stretch of grass that nestled between two spurs of the great tree’s massive trunk.

“Here,” Catherine said, beckoning him across.

He went over to where she stood, then frowned deeply, seeing at once what she meant. Just beside her the bark was deeply split, a huge crack reaching in to breach the medullary ray that carried the tree’s necessary nutrients, and on, deep into the sapwood. The split was large enough for him to walk into.

“You see?” she said softly, her green eyes troubled. “This was his punishment.”

“His *punishment*? For what?”

She walked past him, then sat, looking out across the water toward the copse, the whie stone of the temple barely visible among that rich dark green.

“One of the Guild spoke out of turn. He questioned something that Lord Gehn said to him. Your father was angry. I’ve never seen him so angry. He had us…*sacrifice* the man.”

Atrus went across and crouched, facing her. “What do you mean?”

“We fed him to the sea.”

“I still…”

She put her hand out to stop him. “It doesn’t matter. What does matter is that he threatened us. All of us. Gave us a warning. ‘Question me again,’ he said, ‘and I shall destroy your world. For just as I made it, I can unmake it! Look to the great tree,’ he said. ‘I shall leave my sign upon it.’ ”

Another fissure, Atrus thought, remembering once more what had happened on the Thirty-seventh Age. Yes, everywhere he goes he leaves his mark, like a signature of his imcompetence. And is that why I’m here? Is that the reason why he imprisoned me with the Age Five book? To clear up after himi? To put right what he has to abjectly failed to make good?

He looked back at Catherine. “And the other Guild members…do they know what you plan to do?”

She shook her head. “They would kill me if they did. They are in fear of your father, Atrus. They tremble before his every word.”

“And yet one of them gainsayed him.”

Catherine looked down, as if ashamed.

“That was *your* fault?” he said, after a moment. “You…*influenced* him?”

She looked up, her eyes beseeching him now. “I didn’t mean to. I only thought…” She took a long shuddering breath, then, much quieter, “I thought Lord Gehn might listen to him. I thought your father was a reasonable man.”

“My father? No,” Atrus said matter-of-factly, “my father’s mad.”

He turned and looked, seeing, in the distance beyond the temple mound, another promontory.

“What’s there?” he asked, trying to remember what Gehn had written in the book.

“That’s where the Guild members live. That’s where we have our enclave.”

For some reason the thought of her living alone with nine men disturbed him. “Are they…like you?”

She laughed, then patted the grass beside her. “What do you mean, *like* me? Young?”

He went to shrug, then nodded.

“No,” she said. “Most of them are old…even older than my father. Gehn seems to like them that way. More docile, I guess. Apart from Eavan.”

“Eavan?”

She nodded, sucking in her lips a moment. “My friend. He was the one Gehn sacrificed.”

Atrus looked past her a moment, his eyes drawn to the dark shape of the split in that massive trnk. “Did you love him?”

“*Love?*” The word came out surprised, but after a moment she nodded. “He was like a brother to me. As dear to me as Carel and Erlar. When the other Guild members took him…”

“I’m sorry,” he said when she didn’t go on. “I feel…responsible somehow.”

“You shouldn’t,” she said, looking sharply at him. “After all, he’s not been particularly kind to you, has he? What kind of father imprisons his son?”

He stared at you. “How is it you know so much?”

She looked away, then: “Because your father tells me. Oh…some things he doesn’t even realize he’s telling me. He likes to talk to himself, and sometimes he forgets. Sometimes I’m in his study, copying, and…”

“Hold a moment,” Atrus said. “Tell me…why does he do that?”

She blinked again. “It’s as I said. It speeds up his work.”

“Yes, but…what does he *want?*”

His eyes held hers a moment, begging an answer, his head following hers when she tried to avoid his gaze. She smiled.

“I guess,” she began, sitting up a sittle and turning herself to face him square-on, “I guess he wants to teach us how to write.”

“Is that what he told you?”

She nodded.

“But that’s impossible. No one but D’ni can write. It simply doesn’t work for anyone else.”

She was staring at him curiously now. “You’re sure of that?”

He nodded. “It was the first thing he ever taught me about the Art. And the books—the *Histories*—confirm it. Time and again they stress the fact.”

Strangely, Catherine seemed relieved.

“What is it now?” he asked, puzzled by her reaction.

“I just thought…well, in my book…”

“Your *book?*”

She stared at him a long moment, then nodded.

“Would you like to see it?”

He shrugged. “Okay…”

“Then come,” she said, taking his hand and pulling him up after her. “I’ll show you.”

§

Katran had always been somewhat uncomfortable with the idea that she could make a book. Somehow the whole notion, which at first had fascinated and intrigued her, now horrified her, for if she could conjure up her dreams from ink and paper, what did that make *her?* A mere figment. Just another conjuration of the Lord Gehn’s fitful imagination!

She turned, looking across the shadowed hut to where Gehn’s son, Atrus, sat cross-legged on the narrow bed, reading her book.

So different from his father, so…

So true.

Her eyes went to the young man again, finding it strange the way his presence so disturbed her. It was just…

Atrus looked up from the book and met her eyes, and she instantly knew what it was. It was his kindness. His simple, natural kindness.

“This is quite beautiful,” he said. “I’ve never read anything like it. It’s like…well, it’s like nightfall over the desert or…like the cleft when it was filled with stars.”

She went across and sat beside him.

“The writing…well, as I said, the writing’s wonderful. It’s poetic. But in practical terms…it’s riddled with contradictions, I’m afraid. It

breaks almost every single law of D'ni writing. It has no structure, no *architecture*. And some of these symbols…I've never seen them before. I'm not even sure they mean anything. Where did you learn them? Gehn never taught these to me."

Catherine shrugged.

"For such a place to exist…" Atrus sighed, then, closing the book, handed it back to her. "I'm afraid it wouldn't work, but it does paint wonderful pictures in my mind."

She smoothed her fingers over the pale lemon cover. The green and light blue flecks in it had always reminded her of grass and water, the predominant yellow of the sun. Fecund, it was, like the world surrounding her, but inside…

"That's good," she said. "It must be like a dream."

He stared at her, not understanding.

"When I go there…"

He shook his head. "But you can't…"

"It was just like my dreams," she said, turning to face him again.

"No," he said forcefull, taking the book back from her. "It simply wouldn't work. Writing isn't like that. It's a science. A precisely structured equation of words."

She leaned across him, then opened the book, pointing to the descriptive image on the right-hand page. It was dark, so intensely dark that he had thought it blank. But there was something there.

He looked to her.

"I want you to see it."

"It's…" he said, softer now, the word almost a whisper. Yet even as he said it, she leaned across him and placed his hand upon the image, smiling at him, her smile dissolving in the air as he linked.

20

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"…Impossible."

Atrus stepped out of the air into a huge, conical bowl of darkness. And in the middle of that bowl, at the precise center of the massive, mile-wide hole that pierced it, a powerful column of water—as broad as a river—thundered straight up into the darkness until it was lost from sight, a
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great spike of brilliant, crystalline light glowing like a fierce flame at its center where it emerged from the glowing depths.

Atrus stared, dumbstruck.

A group of large, fireflylike insects glided past, their translucent bodies glowing gold and red, their movements more like the movements of fish than the darting flight of insects. Atrus looked down, meaning to brush one away and was shocked to see it pass right through his legs, reforming like a soap bubble on the other side. Other creatures, their forms no less fantastic—sporting long sparkling quills and fans, extravagant crests or tails like golden chains—fluttered and weaved across that midnight landscape, their forms merging and re-forming, constantly in movement, constantly, it seemed, in transformation.

"It must be a dream, don't you think?" Catherine said, stepping up alongside him.

There was the scent of lemon in the air, the faintest trace of pine and cinnamon.

Atrus nodded absently, his eyes following the course of one of the fireflies, drawn to it, seeing how it seemed to merge and then detach itself from a rocky crag nearby, traces of its bright color left behind in the sparkling black surface of the rock, which pulsed momentarily then was still again.

Not that the rock was like real rock. It had a glassy look to it, as if it were made of gelatin, yet it had the warm, textured feel of wood. Most surprising of all, it smelled…Atrus sniffed, then shook his head, amazed… of roses and camphor.

Everywhere he looked, forms met and merged, the barriers that normally existed between things dissolved away here, as in a dream.

He shivered then looked up, pointing out toward the great chute of water that cascaded endlessly into the night sky.

"Where does it go?"

She laughed; the softest, gentlest laugh he'd ever heard. "Did you ever wonder what it would be like to go swimming out among the stars?"

"Swimming?" For a moment he thought of Anna and the cleft, that evening after the desert rain.

"Yes," she said wistfully. "If it is my dream, we could fall into the night and be cradled by stars and still return to the place where we began."

Atrus stared at her, wondering what she meant. Sometimes she was like her book—beautiful and poetic, yes, and incomprehensible, too.

"I'm not very lucky with water," he said, making her laugh. "But this…" He turned, raising his arms to indicate the Age she'd made. "I can't understand it." He looked to her, shaking his head in amazement. "I just can't see how it works."

He looked about him, disconcerted by the way a bright blue snakelike creature split in two as it brushed against his arm, then split again and again, until there was a whole school of tiny snakes, swimming with identical motions in a tight formation.

"Did you *imagine* all of this?"

"Most of it," she answered, walking past him, then stooping to pluck something from the ground close by. "Some of it I can't remember writing. It's almost like I stop thinking and just…*write*."

She turned back, offering something to him. It was a flower. But not just a flower. As he went to take it from her, it seemed to flow toward his hand and rub against him, like a kitten brushing against its owner's legs.

Atrus moved back.

"What is it?" she asked.

"I don't know." He smiled. "It's just strange, that's all."

Catherine bent down and put the flower down carefully, then looked at him and smiled. "There's nothing here that's harmful. You're safe here, Atrus. I promise you."

Maybe so. But he still felt ill at ease. Nothing here behaved as it ought to behave. Wherever he looked the rules of normality were broken. This was an Age where he laws had been stood on their head. By rights it ought not to exist, and yet it did. So what did that mean? Was it as Catherine had said? Did some other set of laws—laws not discovered by the D'ni—prevail here? Or was this simply an anomaly?

Catherine straightened up, then put out her hand to him. "Come. Let me show you something."

He walked down the slope with her until he stood only a few yards from the edge. Beyond it there was nothing. Nothing but the glow far below them, and the water, spewing up out of the center of that brightness.

"Here," she said, handing him something small, smooth, and flat.

Atrus looked at it. It was a polished piece of stone, small enough to fit into his hand.

"Well?" she said. "Have you never skimmed a stone before?"

He looked to her, then swung his arm back and cast the stone across the darkness, imagining he was skimming it across the surface of a pond.

The stone skimmed rapidly across the vacant air, and then, as if it had suddenly hit a rock, soared in a steep curve upward, finally disappearing into that mighty rush of water.

Atrus stared, openmouthed, as he lost it in that mighty torrent, then turned, to find that Catherine was laughing softly.

"Your face!"

Atrus snapped his mouth shut, then looked back. He found that he wanted to do it again—to see the stone skim across the imptiness then soar.

"Where does it go?"

"Come," she said, taking his hand again. "I'll show you."

§

The tunnel through which they walked was small—just big enough for them to walk upright—and perfectly round, like a wormhole through a giant apple, the passage unevenly lit by some property within the rock itself. It led down, continually curving, until it seemed as though they must be walking on the ceiling. And then they came out. Out into brilliant daylight. Out into a landscape as amazing as the one they had left at the far end of the tunnel.

Atrus winced, his eyes pained by the sudden light, and pulled his glasses on, then straightened, looking out.

Just as the dark side had been strange, so this—the bright side of Catherine's nature, as he saw it—was wonderful. They stood at the top of a great slope—a large rocky hill in the midst of an ocean, one of several set in a rough circle—each hill carpeted with bright, gorgeously scented flowers over which a million butterflied danced and fluttered.

And at the very center of that circle of rocklike hills, a great ringshaped waterfall rushed inward at an angle, toward a single central point far below. Directly over that huge vortex, flickering in and out of

visibility, were twisting, vertical ribbons of fast-moving cloud that appeared high up in the air then vanished quickly into the mouth of that great circular falls.

With a shock of recognition, Atrus understood. “We’re on the other side! It’s the source of the great torrent…it falls *through*…”

And even as he said it, his mouth fell open with wonder.

But how? What physical mechanism was involved? For he knew—*knew,* with a sudden, absolute certainty—that if this existed, then there was a physical reason why it existed. This did not break the D’ni laws, it merely twisted them; pushed them to their limits.

He looked to Catherine, a sudden admiration in his eyes.

“This is beautiful. I never guessed…”

She took his hand. “There’s more. Would you like to see?”

“Yes.”

“Out there,” she said, pointing, directing his eyes toward the horizon.

Atrus stared. Huge thunderclouds massed at the horizon, rising up into the sky like steam from a boiling pot. Incredible thunderstorms, their noise muted by distance, filled the air out there, the whole of the horizon, as far as he could see to left and right, filled with flickering lightning.

It completely surrounds the torus, he realized, turning, looking back at the great hole in the ocean, remembering the great jet of water on the far side of that massive hole. There seemed to be two separate forces at work here—one a jet stream force and the other a ring force to which the water was attracted.

Atrus blinked, then looked to Catherine. “You put most of the mass of the torus at its outer edge, didn’t you?”

She simply smiled at him.

“So the gravity…” Atrus paused, his right fist clenched intently, frown lines etched deep in his brow. “That circle of gravity…*forces* the water through the central hole…then some other force sucks it up into the sky, where it fans out…still captured by the gravitational field of the torus, and falls down the outer edges of that field…*right?*”

She simply smiled at him.

“And as it slowly falls, it forms clouds and the clouds cause the storms and…”

It was impressive. In fact, now that he partly understood it, it was even more impressive than he'd first thought.

He turned, standing, looking about him, then stopped dead. Just across from him was a patch of flowers, nestled in among the lush grass. He walked across, climbing the slope until he stood among them.

Flowers. Blue flowers. Thousands of tiny, delicate blue flowers with tiny, starlike petals and velvet dark stamen.

Moved by the sight, he stooped and plucked one, holding it to his nose, then looked to her.

"How did you know?"

"Know?" Catherine's brow wrinkled in puzzlement. "Know what?"

"I thought…No, it doesn't matter." Then, changing the subject, "What are you to my father?"

She looked down. "I am his servant. One of his Guild members…"

He looked at her, knowing there was more, but afraid to ask.

After a moment, she spoke again. "I am to be married to him."

"Married?"

She nodded, unable to look at him.

Atrus sat heavily, the flowers all around him. He closed his fingers, squeezing the tiny, delicate bloom, then let it fall.

His head hung now and his eyes seemed desolate.

"He has commanded me," she said, stepping closer. "Thirty days, Gehn said. There is to be a great ceremony on Riven…Age Five."

He looked up, a bitter disappointment in his eyes.

She met his eyes clearly. "I'd rather die."

Slowly, very slowly, understanding of what she'd said came to his face. "Then…"

"Then you must help me, Atrus. We have thirty days. Thirty days to change things."

"And if we can't?"

Catherine turned her head, looking about her at the Age she had written, then looked back at Atrus, her green eyes burning. Burning with such an intensity that he felt transfixed, frozen, utterly overwhelmed by this strange woman and the odd powers she possessed. And as she held his gaze, she reached out for his hand, clenching it tightly in her own, and spoke; her voice filling him with a sudden, almost impulsive confience. "We can do wonders, you and I. Wonders."

21

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As the sun slowly set, Atrus stood on the top of the tiny plateau, his glasses pulled down tightly over his eyes, his journal open in his hand, looking out across the Age he had written. Below him lay a cold, dark sea, its surface smooth like oil, or like a mirror blackened by age, its sterile waters filling the great bowl that lay between the bloodred sandstone cliffs.

On the shores of that great sea, the land was bare and empty; more desolate even than the desert he had known as a child. Titanic sandstone escarpments, carved by the action of wind and sun, stretched to the horizon on every side, their stark, bloodred shapes interspersed with jagged, night-black chasms.

He had written in the bare minimum this time. Enough to conduct his experiment and no more. Enough to see whether his theories about the flaws in the Age Five book were true or not.

He had built ten such Ages in the past few weeks. Two for each experiment. In this and one other he was testing whether the changes he sought to make in the orbital system of Age Five would have the desired effects, while in others he was experimenting with the structure of the tectonic plates beneath the planet's crust, the type and strength of the oceanic currents, fluctuations in gravitational fields, and the composition of the crust itself.

What he had done, here and elsewhere, was to recreate the same underlying structures that he had found in the Age Five book, only incorporating specific minor alterations—additions mainly—to the way the thing was phrased. If that new phrasing was correct, then this Age was now stable. And if this was stable, then so would Age Five be once he had written the changes into the book.

Looking about him, he jotted down his observations, then, closing the journal, slipped it into his knapsack.

Thus far his tests had proved one thing conclusively. Age Five was doomed. It would degenerate and be destroyed within a generation, unless he made these vital, telling changes to the book.
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Lifting his glasses, he blinked, then rubbed at his eyes. He was tired, more thired than he'd been in years, yet he could not let up now. It was only ten days until the ceremony, and everything—everything—had to be ready for that time.

Pulling his glasses back down, Atrus waited. The moon would be rising soon, and then he'd know.

If he was right, Gehn had placed Age Five's single moon well inside the synchronous orbital distance from the planet. This had the effect of increasing the planet's tides dramatically, and, ultimately, would result in the moon being dragged into ever-lower orbits until it would finally smash into the planet's surface. That final catastrophe would take many lifetimes, but long before that happened, the great tides generated by the moon's ever closer orbit would destroy the island, smashing it into the surrounding sea.

He needed to push Age Five's moon back into a stable, synchronous orbit: one where its roataion rate would be equivalent to the planet's. What complicated the task was that he would have to achieve this in a manner that could not be directly observed.

As the light dimmed, Atrus pulled his cloak tighter about him. The air here was thin and cold, and it would be good to get back to D'ni, if only for some sleep.

He waited, watching as the sun winked then vanished beneath the edge of the horizon. Atrus turned and, pulling up his glasses, looked for the moon. He saw it at once, directly behind him in the sky, low down, the silver-blue huge and ominous.

Wrong, he thought, chilled by the sight. *It's much too close.*

The tremors began at once, the tiny plateau gently vibrating, as if some machine had started up in the rock beneath his feet.

The sea was stippled now, like a sheet of black, beaten metal.

Atrus stared up at the moon. What had gone wrong? Had he written in a contradiction of some kind? Or were the changes he'd made simply the wrong ones?

Or, in his tiredness, had he mixed up the two books? Was he in the wrong Age—the Age where he had exaggerated the moon's deteriorating orbit?

The trembling grew, became a steady shaking. There was groaning now from deep within the earth, sharp cracks, the sound of rocks falling,

splashing into the sea below, while the sea itself seemed to be boiling, as if in a great cauldron.

In the distance, the land was glowing, not with the silver-blue of moonlight but a fiery orange-red.

A cold wind gusted across the plateau.

Frowning, Atrus stepped over to the edge and, lowering his glasses, increased their magnification.

That distant glow was the molten glow of magma, spewing out from deep within the fiery mantle. Out there, beneath that low and massive moon, the planet's crust was tearing itself apart.

The noise all about him was deafening now, and the shaking was so bad that he found it hard even to stand without bracing himself. It was time to link back.

Atrus half-turned, lowering his right shoulder, meaning to slip the knapsack from his back and take the Linking Book from inside, but as he did the ground lurched violently.

Knocked from his feet, Atrus reached out blindly, grabbing a nearby outcrop, but though it stopped him sliding, it was no good, for the whole plateau was slowly tipping over, sliding inch by inch toward the sea below.

What's more, the knapsack was trapped beneath him and when he tried to lift himself to free it, he lost his grip and began to tumble down the tilted face of the plateau.

For a moment his fingers scrabbled at the surface of the rock, and then, abruptly, he was falling through the air.

"No…!"

His cry was cut short as he hit the cold, dark surface of the sea.

For a moment he panicked, not knowing which way he faced, the water in turmoil all about him, and then his head breached the surface and he gasped for air.

Water splashed his face constantly now, filling his mouth and nose. He struggled not to swallow any, struggled to bring his knapsack around so he could get the book.

And then he saw it.

Directly ahead of him, its thundering crest lit almost demonically by the obscenely huge moon that seemed to ride on its back, was the wave.

A huge, black wave that towered over the surrounding pinnacles of rock, smashing and splintering them as if they were nothing.

And as it came on, the water all about Atrus grew still and smooth, an eery silence falling. A silence that contrasted with the great roar of the oncoming mountain of water.

For a moment Atrus forgot. For a moment he simply stared at the sight.

Then, abruptly, he snapped into action, and, scrabbling at the sack, his fingers numb from the coldness of the water, he took the Linking Book out and flicked it open.

Home…

And even as Atrus placed his hand upon the page, the moon blinked out and the whole of the sea in which he rested seemed to lift up to join that great black wall of water, the noise so loud it made his whole skull tremble, as if at any moment it would shatter.

§

Coming to his senses, Atrus found himself lying in an exhausted heap on the cold floor of the chamber, back on D'ni, a puddle of water from his drenched clothes forming beneath his body.

The air was cool, and the silence, after that hideous destructive roar, was the most welcome sound he'd ever heard.

He let out a long breath, remembering that final moment as the wave towered over him, lifting him up into its sightless maw as if to devour him, then sat up.

Tearing off his glasses, he turned toward his desk. Catherine was sitting there in his chair, unaware of his return, her whole attention focused on the book she was reading.

"Catherine?"

She looked up, closing the book and setting it aside. Then, taking in the state of him, she quickly stood and came around the desk. "Atrus? Are you all right?"

He stood, fending her off. "I'm okay. Just a little trouble with the moon."

"The moon?"

He waved her query aside, then, softly, “What are you here? I thought we said it would be best if you stayed on Riven.”

“I know but…” She stopped, then went over to the desk and turned the book around to face her. “I don’t want to go back.”

“But you must. You can’t stay here.”

“I’ve been working on something,” she said, as if she hadn’t heard him. “I wanted to surprise you.”

Catherine turned and handed him the book.

Atrus stared at her, then, when she said no more, took the book over to the desk, sat and opened it. For a while he was silent, the sound of a turning page the only noise in that great chamber. Then, with a little shake of his head, he looked up.

“What is this?”

She stepped up next to him, looking down at the open pages. “I’ve written us an Age. Somewere we can go. I’ve named it Myst.”

“But this is so different from your other Age.”

“You don’t like it?”

“No…it’s what I would have done, had I time. You…” He laughed, and covered her hand with his own. “I think you are astonishing.”

“I’ve been studying.”

Atrus looked at it again, astounded by the sudden restraint in the writing, the deep understanding of D’ni principles that surpassed even his own. He was silent for a long time.

“There are one or two final touches,” she said, breaking that silence. “But when they’re done…”

“You’ll take me there?”

Catherine smiled. “Of course. Now out of my way, I’ve work to do.”

§

Atrus sat back after Catherine had gone.

Whatever he felt for Catherine, whatever she might feel for him, this was far more important. If his father was allowed to triumph on Age Five, then he would triumph everywhere, for there was no end to Gehn’s ambitions. Having seen what Catherine had—through chance or design—created in her two Ages, he knew now it was possible that Gehn might yet

achieve his dream of resurrecting the D'ni empire, or at least a shadow of it; of creating countless slave worlds, with himself as lord, the fate of millions subject to his will.

There was but one solution: to trap Gehn on Age Five and destroy all of the Linking Books that led out of that Age. But to do so he would have to take the risk that he, too, might be trapped there. And now that Catherine had created Myst island for them—as a sanctuary, away from Gehn—the thought of failure seemed suddenly quite hideous.

Of course, they would have to write another, separate Age—a simple, uninhabited world they might reach from Myst, one where fruit and herbs were plentiful, so they would be provided for, for her new Age was curiously lacking in such things.

Thinking of what he had read of Catherine's latest book, he wondered briefly if she really had written it, or whether, like his father, she had copied elements of it. It was so different, after all, from her other world.

Or was that fair? After all, if she had been studying…

He shook his head, trying to clear it, to keep focused on what he had to do.

His main priority was still to stabilize the island. Once that was done, he would need to find where Gehn kept his Linking Book, for unless he knew that he could not trap him. He would have to go there and look—to search all the likely places until he found it.

And the most likely place was the cave behind the temple.

Right now, however, there were other things to do. Yawning, Atrus took the Age Five notebook from his pocket, then, pulling his journal toward him, turned it to the page on which he had written out the changes he was to make to the Age Five book, and began to write.

§

"Atrus! Atrus!"

He woke, wondering what on earth was happening. Catherine was standing over him, shaking him by the shoulders, calling his name time and time again.

"Atrus! Come on, wake up! You have to listen to me!"

He sat up, groggy, barely able to open his eyes. "What?"

“It’s Gehn…he’s moved the date forward!”

“The date?” Atrus was suddenly wide awake. “Moved it to when?”

“Three days. We’ve got three days.”

He groaned. Then it was impossible! There were still more tests to be made before the Fifth Age could be put right. And then there was the matter of Gehn’s Linking book. Unless he could get hold of that…

“Catherine…you know where Gehn keeps his Linking Book.”

She nodded.

“Could you take me back to Riven and show me where?”

Again she hesitated, then, “What are you going to do?”

“Does my father expect to see you again before the wedding ceremony?”

Catherine shook her head.

“Good.” He looked about him at the cluttered desk. “Then we’ll take all of this to Myst. All but the Myst and Age Five books. Then I want you to stay there, Catherine. I want you to keep away from both D’ni and Riven.”

“But you’ll need help…”

Atrus looked at her sternly. “The biggest help to me will be to know that you’re safe.”

“But what are you going to do?”

He stood up then came around the desk, taking her arms gently in his hands. “Do you trust me, Catherine?”

She smiled, then nodded.

“Then wait for me. As soon as I’ve dealt with my father, I’ll come and join you on Myst island.”

There was a slight flicker in her expression, as if, for a moment, she was going to disagree, then she nodded.

“Good. Then let’s get back to Riven. It’s time you showed me where my father keeps his Linking Book.”

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Careful not to be seen, they walked quickly up the temple’s steps and into the shadowy interior. Since Atrus had last been here, the place had
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been decked out with great gold and red banners, ready for the wedding ceremony.

My father, with Catherine…no, it will never happen.

He followed Catherine through, behind the great golden silk screen that had Gehn's silhouette embroidered at its center, and down the narrow flight of steps, into the cave. It was just as he'd thought.

"He used to bring us here," she said quietly, almost whispering. "There would be a linking ceremony. He'd make the chosen one drink something from one of the golden chalices. It had the faintest taste of aniseed. And afterward…well, afterward you could remember nothing. But lately…" She looked down. "Lately he's trusted me. He brought me here and showed me where the book was hidden."

Atrus watched her go across and, standing on tip-toe, reach into one of the holes that peppered the rock face to the left of the low-ceilinged cave, searching a moment before she withdrew her hand, clutching the slender box that held Gehn's Linking Book.

He walked over, looking down at the floor, then back up again, fixing the position in his mind the way Anna had taught him. Then, nodding, he gestured for her to put it back.

"Come," he said, taking her hand. "Let's go to your hut and get any remaining books."

She pulled on his hand, slowing him, making him face her. "Atrus?"

"Yes?"

She leaned close and kissed his cheek—just a single, gentle peck—then, tugging on his hand, moved on, hurrying now, knowing that there was barely time to do all they had to do before the ceremony.

§

Atrus blinked, the bright sunlight hurting his eyes after the dullness of his prison, and pulled his glasses down over his face.

He was standing on a wooden jetty, the knapsack holding the books heavy on his back. Water lapped against the rocks beneath, while somewhere out in the distant haze seagulls called forlornly. To his right, the sea was calm and green, stippled by the light breeze that blew across the island from the northwest. Facing him, directly east from where he

stood, a barren rock, twenty feet in height and thirty or forty in width rose from the sea like a sawn tree trunk. To its left, the land rose to a sharp peak, over a hundred feet in height, while behind him and to his left, beyond a narrow sheld of rock, tall pines filled the west end of the island.

Atrus smiled. The air was clean and clear, the smell of pine strong. Overhead the sky was a pale blue, wisps of thin cirrus high up in the atmosphere.

He turned back, waiting, then saw Catherine step out of the air onto the wooden planks beside him, the heavily laden knapsack on her back.

"This is beautiful…"

"You wrote it so," he said. "Considering how much time you had, I think you did a marvelous job."

Atrus looked about him, breathing in the rich, clean air. "That smell. It's so wonderful."

He stopped suddenly, realizing that it was the same smell as on the Thirty-seventh Age. Before Gehn had destroyed it.

"What is it?" she asked, noting how his face had changed.

"It's nothing," he said, shrugging off the mood.

"Then come. Let me show you the cabin."

"A cabin! You've built a cabin here already?"

She took his hand and led him up a narrow track that climbed the rock slope. At the top, the ground opened out. There was grass beneath their feet now. The sound of the wind was stronger here—a strangely desolate sound, punctuated by the more peaceful sound of birdsong.

"Yes," he said, after a moment. "I could live here."

Catherine smiled and squeezed his hand, then pointed down the broad grass path between the trees. "It's down there," she said. "Just over on the left."

They walked on along the sloping path until they stood before the cabin.

Atrus stared a while, noting how neatly the logs were fixed, how cleverly she had trimmed the planks that framed the doorway, and shook his head, astonished. There were clearly aspects of Catherine he had never suspected.

"It's a good beginning," he said quietly.

"I'm glad you think so."

He turned, looking back up the slope toward the peak. “We could build things here. Perhaps finally a library of my own.”

“Shhh…” she said, amused by his eagerness. “There’ll be time. After we’ve dealt with Gehn.”

“Yes…” The reminder sobered him. “I’ll see you settled in, then I’d best get back. Two more journeys should see me finished.”

“Atrus?”

“Yes?”

“Are you sure I can’t help?”

He hesitated, then drew her close and kissed her gently, a proper kiss this time—their first.

“No,” he said, staring into the green depths of her eyes. “Just wait for me here. All right?”

“All right,” she answered, leaning forward to kiss his nose gently.

“You promise?”

“I promise.”

“Then come. I’ll drop the books and go back.”

§

But even after the last of the books were transferred and safely stacked in a corner of the cabin, Atrus lingered on Myst island.

Catherine had brought blankets with her from Riven and had made up a rough pallet bed in the corner facing the books, using her knapsack for a pillow. Seeing it, he imagined her here after he had gone and realized, for the first time, how lonely she would be if he did not return.

“Well?” she asked, from the doorway, making him turn, startled by the suddenness of her appearance.

He laughed. “You frightened me.”

“Frightened you?” She came across. “Are you afraid of me, then, Atrus?”

He smiled as her fingers brushed his face. “No. I could never be frightened of you. Surprised, I meant.”

“Then I shall keep surprising you.”

She moved past him, placing the stalk of a small white flower she had picked in the gap between two of the logs so that it hung just above the space where she would sleep.

He stared at it, then met her eyes. “What’s that?”

“It’s to remind me of you, while you’re gone.” She stood, then offered him her hand. “Shall we have a walk, Atrus? Along the shore?”

He realized suddenly that he had outstayed his time, but the idea of walking with her seemed suddenly more important than anything else he had to do.

He took her hand then stepped out into the late afternoon sunlight.

The wind had dropped and it was much warmer now, the sky above them clear. Looking up, he realized it would be a good night to watch the stars and wondered suddenly what the stars were like here on Myst island.

If only I could stay…

But he could not stay. It was not fated. He had to stop Gehn, whatever the outcome.

Catherine looked to him. “Why did you sigh just then?”

“Because this is all so perfect.”

They walked slowly along the path, then cut through the trees and out onto the grassy slope. Below them was the sea, stretching away into the misted distance. Close by, just over to their left, was a tiny island, separated from the shore by a narrow stretch of water.

“Come,” she said, leading him down until they stood just yards from the lapping surface of that sea. “Let’s sit and talk.”

“Talk?” Atrus hesitated, then sat beside her. “About what?”

“About the future.”

“About whether you’ll make it back from Riven, you mean?”

Atrus looked to her, surprised.

“You think I didn’t know what you had planned?”

He laughed. “Am I that predictable?”

She laid her fingers gently on his cheek. “No. But I know you feel you have to do what is right, even if it means sacrificing yourself.”

He laid his hand on hers. “I *will* be back.”

“Yet there’s a risk?”

He nodded.

“And you want me to stay here, no matter what?”

Again he nodded.

“And the Linking Book, back to D’ni?”

“Destroy it, the moment I’m gone.”

“Then if Gehn links here he will be trapped with me, and with a supply of blank books.”

Atrus looked down. It was the one flaw in his plan. To be certain of trapping Gehn he ought to destroy his own Linking Book from Riven to D’ni the instant he returned to Age Five, but that would also trap him there, and he wanted to get back. No, not wanted, *needed*. To be with her.

“I’ll be careful,” he said. “I know where he links to. I’ll take his Linking Book from its hiding place then watch for him to arrive. The moment he’s on Riven, I’ll burn his Linking Book. Then I only have to destroy my own.”

Her eyes were smiling now. Leaning forward she kissed the tip of his nose. “Okay. No more about your plans. What about you?”

“I know almost nothing about you. Your grandmother, Anna, for instance. Do you remember what she was like?”

She was like you, he wanted to say, but the reminder of Anna made him look down.

Taking the almost empty knapsack from his back he removed his journal and handed it to her.

She held the small, gray book delicately, almost as if it were a living thing.

“It’s my journal. I…I want you to read it. While I’m gone. It might…well, it might help you to understand me.”

“In case you don’t come back?”

He hesitated, then nodded.

And suddenly, he understood what it was he had wanted from Catherine. Companionship. Someone to understand him. Someone with whom to share all his adventures and experiments. Someone to be there by his side, as Anna had once been, only not as teacher or substitute mother, but as a full partner.

He reached out, laying his fingers gently on her cheek.

For one tiny moment that was all: the two of them, sitting there in the sunlight beside the water, Catherine with her eyes closed, Atrus’s journal in her lap, her face tilted slightly to meet the gentle touch of his fingers while Atrus stared at her in wonder, as if at an Age he would never visit, only glimpse through the descriptive image on the page.

And then she turned, looking to him again, her green eyes searching his. “You’d better go now, Atrus.”

The idea of leaving was suddenly like contemplating death itself. All he wanted in life was right here on Myst island.

"Catherine…"

"I'll be all right. Now go."

§

As he sat in his chair back on D'ni, Atrus stared sightlessly at the cover of the Age Five book, his heart heavy, resigned now to his fate.

There was only one way—one way alone—that he could be certain of seeing Catherine again, and that was to kill his father. To link to Gehn's study and destroy the man. But that was not possible, for it was not in his nature to harm another, even for the best of reasons.

No good can come of such ill, he thought, knowing that Anna, had she been there, would have agreed with him. If I killed my father, the shadow of my guilt would blight my days with Catherine.

He knew it for a certainty. And so his fate was set. He had to take the risk of losing her forever.

If I cannot have her, I shall at least have something that keeps her memory alive…

He sighed, wishing now that he had asked Anna about his mother. It was only now that he realized that he didn't even know what she looked like.

She looked like you, Atrus, a voice answered in his head, so clear that he looked up, surprised.

"Yes," he said, smiling suddenly.

Atrus drew the Age Five book toward him and opened it to the final page. Then, reaching across, he took the pen from the stand and began to copy the phrases into the Age five book.

§

Atrus linked. In an instant he was gone, the air where he'd been sitting strangely translucent, like the surface of a clear slow-moving stream. Then, abruptly, another figure appeared from the nothingness.

It was Catherine.

Setting the Linking Book down on the desk beside her, she closed the Myst book and slipped it into her knapsack. As she did so, a second figure shimmered out of the air, taking on a solid form. Stepping forward, it stood behind her, watching as Catherine pulled the Age Five book toward her and flipped through until she was on the final page. Then, as Catherine took Atrus's pen from its stand, the figure pointed and encouraged Catherine as she dipped the pen into the ink pot and began to write.

§

The cave behind the temple was dark, the smell of incense strong, wafting down from the great censors hanging from the temple ceiling. Atrus paused a moment, squinting into the deep shadow, listening, then hurried across.

Crouching, he took his grandfather's tinderbox from his pocket and lit it, moving it slowly along the bottom edge of the cave wall until he found the mark stone. Tracing up from there he found the hole where Gehn stored his Linking Book.

Standing on tiptoe, he reached into the narrow orifice, his fingers searching the cold rock. For a moment he thought he had it wrong, but then his fingers brushed the edge of the slender box. He pulled it out and, in the light from the tinderbox, opened it. The Linking Book was there.

Removing it, he returned the box into the hole and slipped the book into his backpack, then, clicking off the tinderbox, he turned and headed back through the temple.

He ducked under the low lintel and out, climbing the steps quickly. Yet as he went to step around the screen, he heard voices from the front of the chamber and stopped, crouching low, keeping himself hidden behind the shadowed shape of the great chair that was thrown onto the golden screen.

"He will be here soon," one of them said, his voice that of an old man. "You will bring the villagers out onto the slope below the temple. They can make their offerings there, after the ceremony."

"It will be done," another, a little younger, answered. Then, in a slightly lower, more conspiratorial tone, "Did you see how she smiled at

the Lord Gehn at the rehearsal? There's no faking that, is there? Now there's a match that will be consummated in heaven!"

Atrus felt himself go cold. Rehearsal? Catherine had said nothing of rehearsals. The words troubled him.

No, he told himself. But then why would they say it if it wasn't true? After all, they did not know he was there behind the screen.

He swallowed, suddenly uncertain, then slowly crept around the screen, peeping over the arm of the chair.

The two men were standing with their backs to him, their cloaks, copies of D'ni Guild cloaks, covered in the Guild's secret symbols. They were graybeards, and as he watched, they bowed to each other and made their way out again.

He hurried across, seeing what they had been here to deliver. On a marble stand in the very center of the chamber was placed a shallow bowl made of special D'ni stone, and on that bowl were two beautiful golden bracelets, one markedly thicker than the other.

The mere sight of them made his stomach turn.

Did you see how she smiled at the Lord Gehn? Did you see how she smiled?

He felt like picking up the bowl and throwing it across the room, but knew he must deny the urge. Gehn must suspect nothing. He must think his bride was coming. He must believe…

Atrus shook his head, pushing aside the doubts, the endless flood of questions, that threatened to drown him.

Catherine is on Myst island. I took her there myself. She's safe. Or will be once I've trapped Gehn here on Riven.

He turned and hurried to the front of the chamber, peering around one of the pillars. The two Guild members were nowhere to be seen. Slowly, cautiously, he made his way down the steps and out across the open space in front of the temple, slipping in among the trees, then making his way along the path toward the beach.

Before he came to the cliff he stopped, searching quickly among the trees, gathering up any loose twigs and branches he could find. Satisfied he had enough for his purpose, he hurried on, making his way down the steep cliffside path.

As he came out beneath the overhang of rock, he paused, staring out across the rocky beach. Two of the strange, toothlike rocks had been

broken—sheared off, it seemed. For a moment he watched the tide come in, seeing how the incoming waves seemed to undulate like a windblown sheet, tiny globules of water, heated by the late afternoon sun, tumbling across the beach, hundreds of tiny bubbles drifting above the slow, incoming tide before they merged with it again.

He would be sad to leave this world. Sad not to have come to know it better than he did.

Turning back, he went over to the cliff face. Putting down the stack of wood, he busied himself collecting a number of large rocks, placing them in a tight circle, then, gathering up the wood again, he laid out twigs and branches inside the circle of rocks to form a rudimentary fire pit.

Kneeling, Atrus cupped the tinder between his hands and struck it, then lit the kindling wood beneath the main stack, watching it catch, then blowing on it to encourage the flames, seeing them begin to lick at the Linking Book.

Atrus leaned back. There! Now for *his* Linking Book! All he would have to do would be to hold his Linking Book over the fire as he linked—letting the book fall into the flames and be destroyed, trapping Gehn here forever.

Going across, he hauled himself up the pocked face of the cliff until he was facing the recess where his book was hidden. It was some way back, so he had to haul himself up over the lip and squeeze inside, wriggling in until he could reach it.

23

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When Atrus came to he was standing in the open air near the temple, his arms pulled up tightly behind his back, his wrists bound, his body secured at neck and waist and ankles to a thick pole that had been embedded in the earth. The blood pounded in his head, and when he tried to open his eyes he pain was intense.

Slowly he let his eyes grow accustomed to the failing light, then, moving his head as much as the binding allowed, he looked about him.

Close by, on a small table—so close that, had his hands been unbound, he could have reached them—were the two Linking Books.
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He groaned, remembering, then felt a touch on his shoulder, felt his father's breath upon his cheek.

"So you are back with us, Atrus," Gehn said quietly, speaking to him alone. "I thought for a while that I had lost you. It seems I do not know my own strength sometimes."

Atrus hung his head, grimacing at the thought of Catherine. She was there, on Myst, waiting. And now he had failed her.

"Catherine, ah clever Catherine," Gehn spoke as if he heard Atrus's thoughts. "You really didn't think she'd miss her own wedding?"

With that, Gehn turned to face a figure who stood just beyond him in the shadows of the surrounding trees. Atrus went limp as the figure stepped forward into the sunlight.

It was her!

Atrus closed his eyes and groaned, remembering the old men's words, recalling the sight of the two golden bracelets laying there in the shallow red-black bowl.

She is marrying my father…

The thought was unbearable. He could almost hear their laughter. Yet when he opened his eyes again, it was to see Gehn, alone, standing before the Age five islanders, his hands raised, his appearance that of a great king come among his subjects.

"People of the Fifth Age," Gehn began, his voice powerful, commanding. "It had come to my notice that some of you…" Gehn pointed to a little group Atrus had not noticed, or who had possibly not been there until that moment; who knelt there abjectly, just below Gehn, their hands bound: the two brothers, Carel and Erlar among them. "Some of you, as I say, have taken it upon yourselves to help my enemies. To nurse this imposter"—he turned, this time indicating Atrus—"who dares to call himself my son!"

Gehn turned back, raising his hands again. "Such behavior cannot be tolerated. Such defiance must be *punished*."

There was a great murmur of fear from the watching islanders.

"Yes," Gehn went on. "You were warned, but you did not listen. And so, in punishment, there will be great tides…"

"No…" Atrus said, finding his voice.

"And the sun will turn black…"

"No…"

“And the ground…the very earth will shake and the great tree fall!”

“No!” Atrus cried out a third time, this time loud enough for some among the crowd to hear him. “No! He’s wrong! I’ve fixed it. All of those things…all of the weaknesses in the book. I’ve put them right, I’ve…”

Atrus stopped, seeing the hideous grin of triumph on his father’s face as he stepped up to him.

“*Well done*, Atrus…I *knew* I could count on you.” Gehn’s smile was suddenly hard and sneering. “I shall be most interested to read the changes you have so graciously crafted for me.” Then, stepping away, he clicked his fingers, calling to the nearest of the Guild Members. “Untie him!”

Turning to face the crowd again, Gehn raised his hands. “People of the Fifth Age. You are most fortunate. I have asked my servant here to do my bidding and he has done so. Your world is safe now. Yet if you transgress again, if I find that any among you have sought to help my enemies, then the full weight of my wrath shall fall on you. I shall destroy your world, just as I created it!” He sniffed deeply. “But let us not dwell upon that now. Now is a time to look forward, and to celebrate, for tonight, at sunset, I shall take a daughter of this Age to be my bride and rule the thousand worlds with me!”

There was a great cheer at that. Gehn turned, looking to Atrus, his whole demeanor triumphant.

Atrus, seeing that look, turned his head, stung by it, all fight gone from him now. He had been duped. Used by the two of them. *Betrayed.*

He pressed his hands together, the pain suddenly unbearable, then gently rubbed at his wrists where the binding rope had chafed them. He was beaten. There was nothing more he could do.

But ehn was not done. Stepping up to Atrus, he pressed his face close to Atrus’s, speaking so only he could hear.

“Don’t think that I have finished with you, boy. You have caused me an inordinate amount of trouble, and I shall not forget that. As far as I am concerned, you are no longer my son. Do you understand me? I do not need you anymore, Atrus. You have served your purpose.” Gehn looked to Catherine and smiled; a hideous, gloating smile. “Yes…you see it, don’t you? Catherine and I…” He laughed. “She’s a strong young woman. Perhaps my next son will not fail me!”

Atrus groaned. It was a nightmare. Had he still been bound to the post he could not have felt more impotent.

Catherine…my beloved Catherine…

He looked up, surprised. The ground was trembling.

No…he was imaging it.

And then the ground shook violently, as if a great rock had been dislodged beneath them. From within the temple came the sound of the marble stand toppling, the tray with the two bracelets on it clattering across the marble floor.

“No…” Gehn said, looking about him wild-eyes. “No!”

But even as he said it; a great crack opened in the ground before the temple steps.

§

The sky was slowly turning black. The sun, which only moments before had blazed down from the late afternoon sky, was being eaten, a curved blade of blackness devouring its pallid face inch by inch.

One by one the stars winked into place in the sudden night.

With a great low, groaning shudder, like some gargantuan animal waking from long hibernation, the ground shook once more, the quake much stronger this time, rumbling on and on, causing the temple roof to fall, throwing many of the Guild from their feet and knocking over the table on which the Linking Books had been placed.

Atrus stared about him in disbelief, seeing the jagged pattern of thick black cracks that now covered the meadow. Then, seeing the fallen books, he rushed to pick them up, yet as he did, Gehn stepped out in front of him, wielding a massive ceremonial spear he had grabbed from one of the Guild, the gold and red pennant still fluttering from its shaft.

“Leave them!” Gehn growled.

“Get out of the way!” Atrus yelled back, crouching, knowing that there was no other way now except to fight his father. Riven was doomed, and even if he’d lost Catherine, he had to stop Gehn.

But Gehn had other ideas. He laughed mockingly. “If you want the books, you will have to come through *me* to get them!”

“If that’s what it takes!” Atrus said and threw himself at Gehn, hoping to overwhelm him. His first rush almost succeeded, his charge

knocking Gehn back. For a moment they struggled, Atrus's hands gripping the spear's shaft, trying to keep Gehn from using it against him. Then, suddenly, Gehn released his grip, and Atrus found himself tumbling over, the spear falling from his grasp. All about them now, the earth was breaking up, huge cracks appearing everywhere one looked. The air was growing hot and everything was underlit now by the red and orange glow emanating from the fissures.

Atrus got up and, turning, went to throw himself at his father again, but he was too slow. As he charged, Gehn stepped aside and, putting out his boot, tripped him, then stood over him, the spear point pressed hard into his chest.

"You're useless. I should have killed you long ago!"

Atrus answered, his voice defiant. "Then kill me."

Gehn lifted the spear, his muscles tensing, but as he did a shout rang out behind him. "Gehn!"

Gehn turned, to see Catherine, her dark hair streaming out behind her in the wind that had blown up, one of the Linking Books in each hand, standing over a large crack that had opened in the ground, its dark, jagged shape lit redly from below.

"Harm him and I'll throw the books into the crack!"

Gehn laughed disbelievingly. "But Catherine, my love…"

"Let him go," she ordered, her voice unyielding now. "Let him go or I'll drop the books into the fissure."

Again he laughed, then looked to Atrus. "No…No, I…"

To his astonishment, she let the Linking Book fall from her right hand. With a gust of flame it vanished into the crack. Gone.

Both Gehn and Atrus gasped.

"No!" Gehn screamed, then, in a softer, more cajoling voice, "Come now, Catherine…let us discuss this. Let us talk about this *reasonably."*

He lifted the spear from Atrus's chest, then, throwing it aside, took a step toward her, his hand out, palms open. "Remember our plans, Catherine. Remember what we were going to do. A thousand worlds we were going to rule. Think of it. Whatever you wanted…I could write it for you. You could have your own Age. You could live there if you wanted, but…if you destroy that second book we shall be trapped here. Trapped on a dying world!"

Gehn took a second step.

"You *want* the Linking Book?" Catherine asked, a faint smile lighting her features for the first time.

Gehn nodded, then slowly put out his hand, a smile appearing at the corners of his mouth.

"Then have it!" she said and tossed the Linking Book high into the air, its arc carrying it out over the smoldering crevice.

With a gasp of horror, Gehn dived for the book, straining to get to it, one hand grasping in the air to catch it, but he was too late. With a burst of flame it vanished into the red glow.

Gehn stared disbelievingly, then, getting up onto his elbows he turned, furious now, looking for them. But Atrus and Catherine had gone. The wind was howling now, like a gale, bending the nearby trees and making the loosened earth tumble up the slope, as if defying gravity.

As he watched, the temple heaved a sigh and fell inward, the sound of stone grating against stone like the groan of a dying giant. For a brief instant he thought he could see the shape of a giant dagger jutting from the ruins. Then, with a great crack of sound and a fierce, almost blinding flash of light, a lightning bolt hit the summit of the great tree, two hundred yards from where he knelt. At once the upper branches exploded into flame, a huge fireball climbing into the sky above its crest.

In that sudden, blazing light Gehn saw the two of them on the far side of the copse, beneath the trees, their backs to him as they ran. As the light slowly died, their figures merged again with the darkness of the trees. But he knew now where they were headed. Getting up onto his feet he began to run, the howling wind at his back.

§

"Wait! *Wait!*" Atrus shouted, pulling Catherine back, barely able to hear himself over the noise of the storm. "You've got to tell me what's happening!"

"Don't worry!" she yelled back at him, pulling her hair back from her face. "Everything's going just as we planned!"

He stared at her. "As *who* planned?"

"Anna and I."

His mouth fell open. *"Anna?"*

Overhead the branches of the trees were thrashing wildly in the wind. As she made to answer him, the crash of a falling tree made them both jump.

It isn't possible…

Atrus stared at Catherine a moment longer, then numbly let her lead him on through the trees.

They were following a narrow crack. At first he'd thought it was just like all the others that had opened up, but there was something very strange about this one. It *glowed*…not red, but blue…a vivid, ice cold blue.

To either side, dirt and leaves, broken branches and small stones jumped and tumbled, dragged along by the wind that seemed not so much to blow from behind as to draw them on. And where those tiny particles brushed against the crack, they vanished, sucked into that ice-cold fissure.

They ran on between the trees, the crack slowly widening beside them. And then suddenly, there where the trees ended, the fissure opened out to form a kind of cleft, the edge of it outlined by that cold blue light. Inside, however, it was dark—an intense, vertiginous darkness filled with stars.

Atrus stopped, astonished. The wind still tugged at his legs, but its noise was not as strong here as it was among the trees. Even so, he had to struggle to keep his footing. His right hand gripped Catherine's tightly, afraid to let go in case she, too, was sucked into that strange, star-filled hole.

He looked to her, wondering if she was as afraid as he was, only to find her strangely calm, a beatific smile on her lips and in her beautiful green eyes.

"What is it?" he asked, his eyes drawn back to the fissure, seeing how everything seemed to be sucked into it; how leaves and earth and lumps of rock tumbled over the edge and seemed to wink into nonexistence.

And other things…

Atrus blinked, noticing some of Catherine's fireflies, melting and merging, pulsing with brilliant color as they flickered across that dreamlike landscape.

Turning to Atrus, Catherine freed her hand, then took the knapsack from her back and opened it.

“Here,” she said, handing him a book.

Atrus stared, dumbfounded. It was the Myst book.

“But what…?”

She put a finger to his lips, silencing him.

“Did you ever wonder what it would be like to go swimming out among the stars?”

Catherine smiled then; opening the Linking Book, she placed her hand against it. “We could fall into the night and be cradled by stars and still return to the place where we began…”

The last word was an echo as she vanished.

“But what do I do?” he called after her, holding up the book.

The answer came from behind him. “That’s easy, Atrus. You give the book to me.”

Atrus turned, facing his father. Gehn stood there, a large chunk of jagged rock in his hand. His glasses were gone and his ash-white hair was disheveled, but there was still something powerful, something undeniably regal about him.

He looked down at the Myst book in his hands. His first impulse had been to use the book to return to the island, but there was an obvious flaw with that. If he used the book, the book would remain here in his father’s possession. And Gehn would surely follow him. His second impulse had been to throw the book into the fissure, but something stopped him—something in what Catherine had said…

He smiled.

Raising the book in one hand, he held it out, then took a step back, onto the lip of the fissure, the wind tugging at his boots, a strange coldness at his back suddenly.

A muscle beneath Gehn’s left eye jumped. “If you throw the book into that chasm, I’ll throw you with it!” he snarled. “Give it to me. Give it to me *now!”*

Atrus shook his head disdainfully.

Gehn took a step back, letting the rock fall from his open hand. “Unless…”

“Unless what?”

Atrus stared at Gehn suspiciously. Holding the book up was a strain, but it didn’t matter. Nothing mattered now, not even the dull, throbbing ache at the base of his skull.

“Unless *what?* Give me a single reason why I should trust you.”

Gehn shrugged. “Because you are my *son*.”

Atrus laughed bitterly. “I thought you’d already disowned me. Or did I hear *that* wrong, too?”

“Forgive me Atrus. I was angry. I thought…”

“What? That I’d see your point of view? That I’d realize that you were right? That I would come to see myself as a god?”

Gehn blinked. “But you *need* me, Atrus. I know so much. Things you will never know. Think of the experience I have, he knowledge. It would be a wase not to call upon it, no?” Gehn shook his head, as if regretful. “You were such a good student, Atrus. So quick. So nimble of mind. It would be such a shame if your studies were curtailed…”

Atrus stared back at him, expressionless.

“What is it?” Gehn said, puzzled now. His hand, which had extended toward Atrus, drew back slightly.

“It’s *you*,” Atrus said, lifting the book higher. “All those things you taught me…they were just words, weren’t they? Empty, meaningless words. As empty as your promises.” There was a momentary hurt in the young man’s eyes, then, “I wanted so much from you. So much. But you failed me.”

“But I taught you, Atrus. Without me…”

Atrus shook his head. “No, Father. Anything I ever learned that was of any value to me, anything *important*, I got from Anna, long before I met you. You…*you* taught me nothing.”

Gehn glared at him.

The sky was growing lighter, the wind slowly dying.

“I should never have left you with her,” Gehn said, after a moment. “She spoiled you. You were a blank book, waiting to be written…”

“You would have ruined me, just as you’ve ruined everything you’ve touched. Yes, and then discarded me.”

“*No!* I *loved* you, Atrus.”

“Love? What kind of love is it that binds with ropes and locks its loved ones in a cell?”

“That was never intended to be a prison, Atrus.” Gehn swallowed. “It was only a test. All of it.”

Atrus stared back at him, silent now, the fissure behind him dark and cold, glistening with stars, the Myst book edged by that strange blue

light.

Gehn studied his son a moment, taking in the situation, then took a step toward him, putting out a hand. “Please, Atrus. There is still a chance for us.”

“No, Father. Whatever linked us once has been destroyed. You burned it with those books you burned. You erased it along with those phrases in my book. Little by little you destroyed it. Don’t you see that? Well, now you’ve got the justice you deserve. You can stay here in the little haven you’ve created for yourself, in your tiny island universe, and play god with your ‘creations’.”

The word was firm and final, and as he spoke it Atrus stepped back, out over the lip of the fissure, falling, tumbling down into that great expanse of stars, his hands gripping the book, opening the cover as he fell into the darkness.

What do you see, Atrus?

I see stars Grandmother. A great ocean of stars…

Epilogue

~~~~~~~~~~

Sunlight winked through the tall pines, casting long shadows on the lawn in front of the library. It was late now, but the boys were still out, playing in the woods that covered the south end of the island. Catherine, standing on the porch, listened a moment, hearing their distant shouts, then shaded her eyes.

“Can you see them?” Atrus asked, stepping out from the library, his pale eyes squinting in the sunlight.

She turned, the hem of her dark green dress flowing over the polished boards.

“Don’t worry so,” she said, her green eyes smiling back at him. “Anna’s with them. They’ll be in before it’s dark.”

He smiled, then came across and placed his arms about her.

“Have you finished yet?” she asked softly, wrapping her own arms about him and pulling him closer.

“No…” Agrus sighed wearily. “I’m close though.”

“Good.”
~~~~~~~~~~

He kissed her gently, then, releasing her, went back inside, taking his seat at the desk that he'd made for himself. For a moment or two he looked out through the brightly-lit rectangle of the doorway at Catherine, drinking in the simple sight of her, then, taking his pen, he looked back at his journal and began to write:

> It is strange now to conceive that I could have doubted her, even for a second, and yet in that moment when my father surprised me in the cave, I was certain beyond all doubt that she had betrayed me. Certain, yes, and at the same time heartbroken, for I had transferred to her person all of that love, all of that natural affection that my father had so unnaturally rejected. Love given freely and without hope of repayment. Yet how was I to know how kind, yes, and how cunning, too, my Catherine could be. My savior, my partner, yes, and now my wife.
> Atrus paused, recalling the shock he'd felt, that moment when Catherine had revealed to him that Anna was behind it all; the feeling, the overwhelming feeling he'd had, of having stepped into one of Catherine's dream worlds. But it had been true. Without Anna's forethought he would have been trapped on Riven still. That was, if Gehn had let him live, after what he'd done. He dipped the pen and wrote again:
>
> Only a remarkable woman would have done what Anna did, following us down through that labyrinth of tunnels and broken ways, into D'ni. She had known, of course, that Gehn would not keep his word. Had known what I, in my innocence, could not have guessed—that my father was not merely untrustworthy, but mad. All those years I spent on K'veer she had kept a distant eye on me, making sure I came to no harm at my father's hands, while she awaited the moment of my realization.

Atrus looked up, remembering that moment; feeling once more the weight of his disillusion with his father. Such things, he knew now, could not be passed on like other things, they had to be experienced. A parent—a good parent, that is—had to let go at some point, to let their children make choices, for choices were part of the Maker's scheme, as surely as all the rest. He dipped the pen then wrote again, faster now, the words spilling from him:

> Anna saw me flee K'veer and sought to find me in the tunnels once again, but Gehn had got there first. Even then she would have intervened, but for the mute. Seeing them carry me back, unconscious, to K'veer, she had known she had to act. That evening she had gone to K'veer and, risking all, had entered my father's study, meaning to confront him. But Gehn was not there. It was Catherine she met. Catherine who, after that first moment of shock and surprise, had chosen to trust and help her.
> So it was that Catherine had known me even before she met me in the hut on Riven; like an Age one has first read in a descriptive book and then subsequently linked to.
> I should have known at once that Myst was not Catherine's. But how was I to know otherwise? I had thought Anna lost. Lost forever.

> And how was I to know that, just as I made my preparations, so the two of them made theirs, pooling their talents—Anna's experience and Catherine's intuitive genius—to craft those seemingly cataclysmic events on Age Five, in such a way that after a time they would reverse themselves, making Catherine's former home, now Gehn's prison, stable once more.
> …And the Myst book?

Briefly he looked about him at the room he'd made, pleased by his efforts, then, picking up his pen again, he began to write, setting down the final words. The ending that was not a final ending:

> I realized the moment I fell into the fissure that the book would not be destroyed as I had planned. It continued falling into that starry expanse, of which I had only a fleeting glimpse. I have tried to speculate where it might have landed, but I must admit that such conjecture is futile. Still, questions about whose hands might one day hold my Myst book are unsettling to me. I know my apprehensions might never be allayed, and so I close, realizing that perhaps the ending has not yet been written.

MYST

THE BOOK OF TI'ANA

RAND MILLER

with david wingrove

TO DEB AND THE GIRLS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

It’s amazing how little we know. After all these years, about the history of D’ni and the story surrounding MystIsland. Over the years the story is revealed piece by piece, like a large puzzle waiting to be put together. It’s only with the continuing effort of a core group of people that the pieces are uncovered and assembled to make a book like this possible.

It has been my pleasure to uncover the past events in D’ni history even as Robyn continues to bring the events surrounding MystIsland to its final chapter. Not having Robyn’s help for this translation, the burden of discovery was taken up by Chris Brandkamp, Richard Watson, and Ryan Miller working closely with David Wingrove. Our task was large and yet the results are stunning, as for the first time the public gains a glimpse into the richness and complexity of the D’ni civilization.

So it is to these four close friends (particularly David and Chris for their long hours of work) that I extend my sincerest thanks and admiration. This story reaches you because of their dedication and brilliance.

RAND MILLER

PART ONE: ECHOES IN THE ROCK

The sounding capsule was embedded in the rock face like a giant crystal, its occupants sealed within the translucent, soundproofed cone.

The Guild Master sat facing the outstretched tip of the cone, his right hand resting delicately on the long metal shaft of the sounder, his blind eyes staring at the solid rock, listening.

Behind him, his two young assistants leaned forward in their narrow, metal and mesh seats, concentrating, their eyes shut tight as they attempted to discern the tiny variations in the returning signal.

"Na'grenis," the old man said, the D'ni word almost growled as his left hand moved across the top sheet of the many-layered map that rested on the map table between his knees. *Brittle.*

It was the tenth time they had sent the signal out on this line, each time a little stronger, he echoes in the rock changing subtly as it penetrated deeper into the mass.

"Kenen voohee shuhteejoo," the younger of his two assistants said tentatively. *It could be rocksalt.*

"Or chalk," the other added uncertainly.

"Not this deep," the old man said authoritatively, flicking back the transparent sheets until he came to one deep in the pile. Holding it open, he reached beside him and took a bright red marker from the metal rack.

"Ah," the two assistants said as one, the carmine mark as clear an explanation as if he'd spoken.

"We'll sound either side," the old man said after a moment. "It might only be a pocket…"

He slipped the marker back into the rack, then reached out and took the ornately decorated shaft of the sounder, delicately moving it a fraction to the right, long experience shaping his every movement.

"Same strength," he said. "One pulse, fifty beats, and then a second pulse."

At once his first assistant leaned forward, adjusting the setting on the dial in front of him.

There was a moment's silence and then a vibration rippled along the shaft towarad the tapered tip of the cone.

A single, pure, clear note sounded in the tiny chamber, like an invisible spike reaching out into the rock.

§

“What is he doing?”

Guild Master Telanis turned from the observation window to look at his guest. Master Kedri was a big, ungainly man. A member of the Guild of Legislators, he was here to observe the progress of the excavation.

“Guild Master Geran is surveying the rock. Before we drill we need to know what lies ahead of us.”

“I understand that,” Kedri said impatiently. “But what is the problem?”

Telanis stifled the irritation he felt at the man’s bad manners. After all, Kedri was technically his superior, even if, within his own craft, Telanis’s word was as law.

“I’m not sure exactly, but from the mark he made I’d say he’s located a patch of igneous material. Magma-based basaltic rocks from a fault line, perhaps, or a minor intrusion.”

“And that’s a problem?”

Telanis smiled politely. “It could be. If it’s minor we could drill straight through it, of course, and support the tunnel, but we’re still quite deep and there’s a lot of weight above us. The pressures here are immense, and while they might not crush us, they could inconvenience us and set us back weeks, if not months. We’d prefer, therefore, to be certain of what lies ahead.”

Kedri huffed. “It all seems rather a waste of time to me. The lining rock’s strong, isn’t it?

“Oh, very strong, but that’s not the point. If the aim were merely to break through to the surface we could do that in a matter of weeks. But that’s not our brief. These tunnels are meant to be permanent—or, at least, as permanent as we can make them, rock movement willing!”

Still, Kedri seemed unsatisfied. “All this stopping and starting! A man could go mad with waiting!”

One could; and some, unsuited to the task, did. But of all the guilds of D’ni, this, Telanis knew, was the one best suited to their nature.

“We are a patient race, Master Kedri,” he said, risking the anger of the other man. “Patient and thorough. Would you have us abandon the

habits of a thousand generations?”

Kedri made to answer curtly, then saw the look of challenge in Telanis’s eyes and nodded. “No. You are right, Guild Master. Forgive me. Perhaps they chose the wrong man to represent our guild.”

Perhaps, Telanis thought, but aloud he said, “Not at all, Master Kedri. You will get used to it, I promise. And we shall do our best to keep you busy while you are here. I shall have my assistant, Aitrus, assigned to you.”

And now Kedri smiled, as if this was what he had been angling for all along. “That is most kind, Master Telanis. Most kind, indeed.”

§

The excavator was quiet, the lighting subdued. Normally, the idle chatter of young crewmen would have filled the narrow corridor, but since the observers had come there was a strange silence to the craft that made it seem abandoned.

As the young guildsman walked along its length, he glanced about warily. Normally he took such sights for granted, but today he seemed to see it all anew. Here in the front section, just behind the great drill, was the Guild Master’s cabin and, next to it, through a bulkhead that would seal automatically in times of emergency, the chart room. Beyond that, opening out to both right and left of the corridor, was the equipment room.

The excavator was as self-contained as any ship at sea, everything wtored, each cupboard and drawer secured against sudden jolts, but here the purpose of the craft was nakedly displayed, the massive rock drills lain neatly in their racks, blast-marble cylinders, protective helmets, and analysis tubes racked like weaponry.

The young guildsman stopped, looking back along the length of the craft. He was a tall, athletic-looking young man with an air of earnestness about him. His dark red jumpsuit fit him comfortably rather than tightly; the broad, black leather tool belt at his waist and his long black leather boots part of the common uniform worn by all the members of the expedition.

His fine black hair was cut short and neat, accentuating his fineboned features, while his eyes were pale but keen. Intelligent,

observant eyes.

He passed on, through the crew quarters—the empty bunks stacked three to a side into the curve of the ship's walls, eighteen bunks in all—and, passing through yet another bulkhead, into the refectory.

Master Jerahl, the ship's cook, looked up from where he was preparing the evening meal and smiled.

"Ah, Aitrus. Working late again?"

"Yes, Guild Master."

Jerahl grinned paternally. "Knowing you, you'll be so engrossed in some experiment, you'll miss your supper. You want me to bring you something through?"

"Thank you, Guild Master. That would be most welcome."

"Not at all, Aitrus. It's good to see such keenness in a young guildsman. I won't say it to their faces, but some of your fellows think it's enough to carry out the letter of their instructions and no more. But people notice such things."

Aitrus smiled.

"Oh, some find me foolish, Aitrus, I know. It's hard not to overhear things on a tiny ship like this. But I was not always a cook. Or, should I say, *only* a cook. I trained much as you train now, to be a Surveyor—to know the ways of the rock. And much of what I learned remains embedded here in my head. But I wasn't suited. Or, should I say, I found myself better suited to *this* occupation."

"You *trained*, Master Jerahl?"

"Of course, Aitrus. You think they would allow me on an expedition like this if I were not a skilled geologist?" Jerahl grinned. "Why, I spent close on twenty years specializing in stress mechanics."

Aitrus stared at Jerahl a moment, then shook his head. "I did not know."

"Nor were you expected to. As long as you enjoy the meals I cook, I am content."

"Of that I've no complaints."

"Then good. Go on through. I shall bring you something in a while."

Aitrus walked on, past the bathing quarters and the sample store, and on into the tail of the craft. Here the corridor ended with a solid metal door that was always kept closed. Aitrus reached up and pulled down the

release handle. At once the door hissed open. He stepped through, then heard it hiss shut behind him.

A single light burned on the wall facing him. In its half-light he could see the work surface that ran flush with the curved walls at waist height, forming an arrowhead. Above and below it, countless tiny cupboards held the equipment and chemicals they used for analysis.

Aitrus went across and, putting his notebook down on the worktop, quickly selected what he would need from various cupboards.

This was his favorite place in the ship. Here he could forget all else and immerse himself in the pure, unalloyed joy of discovery.

Aitrus reached up, flicking his fingernail against the firemarble in the bowl of the lamp, then, in the burgeoning glow, opened his notebook to the page he had been working on.

§

"Aitrus?"

Aitrus took his eye from the lens and turned, surprised he had not heard the hiss of the door. Jerahl was standing there, holding out a plate to him. The smell of freshly baked *chor bahkh* and *ikhah nijuhets* wafted across, making his mouth water.

Jerahl smiled. "Something interesting?"

Aitrus took the plate and nodded. "You want to see?"

"May I?" Jerahl stepped across and, putting his eye to the lens, studied the sample a moment. When he looked up again there was a query in his eyes.

"Tachylyte, eh? Now why would a young fellow like you be interested in basaltic glass?"

"I'm interested in anything to do with lava flows," Aitrus answered, his eyes aglow. "It's what I want to specialize in, ultimately. Volcanism."

Jerahl smiled as if he understood. "All that heat and pressure, eh? I didn't realize you were so romantic, Aitrus!"

Aitrus, who had begun to eat the meat-filled roll, paused and looked at Jerahl in surprise. He had heard his fascination called many things by his colleagues, but never "romantic."

“Oh, yes,” Jerahl went on, “once you have seen how this is formed, nothing will ever again impress half so much! The meeting of superheated rock and ice-chill water—it is a powerful combination. And *this*—this strange translucent matter—is the result.”

Again Jerahl smiled. “Learning to control such power, that is where we D’ni began as a species. That is where our spirit of inquiry was first awoken. So take heart, Aitrus. In this you are a true son of D’ni.”

Aitrus smiled back at the older man. “I am sorry we have not spoken before now, Guild Master. I did not know you knew so much.”

“Oh, I claim to know very little, Aitrus. At least, by comparison with Master Telanis. And while we are talking of the good Guild Master, he was asking for you not long back. I promised him I would feed you, then send you to his cabin.”

Aitrus, who had just lifted the roll to his mouth again, paused. “Master Telanis wants me?”

Jerahl gestured toward the roll. “Once you’ve been fed. Now finish that or I shall feel insulted.”

“Whatever you say, Master!” And, grinning, Aitrus bit deep into the roll.

§

Aitrus stopped before the Guild Master’s cabin and, taking a moment to prepare himself, reached out and rapped upon the door.

The voice from inside was calm and assured. “Come in!”

He slid back the heavy bolt and stepped inside, closing the door behind him. That much was habit. Every door in the craft was a barrier against fire or unwelcome gases. Turning, he saw that Master Telanis was at his desk looking at the latest survey chart. Facing him across the table was Master Geran. Also there were the four Observers who had joined them three days back. Aitrus took a step toward them and bowed.

“You sent for me, Guild Master?”

“I did. But if you would wait a moment, Aitrus, I must first deal with the news Master Geran has brought us.”

Aitrus lowered his head, conscious that the Legislator—the big man, Kedri—was watching him closely.

“So, Geran,” Telanis went on, indicating the bright red line that ran across the chart in front of him, “you recommend that we circumvent this area?”

The blind man nodded. “The fault itself is narrow, admittedly, but the surrounding rock is of low density and likely to collapse. We could cut through it, of course, and shore up on either side, but I’d say there is more to come the other side of that.”

“You know that?” Kedri asked, interrupting the two.

Geran turned his blank, unseeing eyes upon the Legislator and smiled. “I do not *know* it, Master Kedri, but my instinct is that this is the mere root of a much larger igneous intrusion. Part of a volcanic system. Imagine the roots of a tree. So such things are. As excavators, we try hard to avoid such instabilities. We look for hard, intact rock. Rock we have no need to support.”

Kedri looked puzzled at that. “But I thought it was your practice to support everything?”

Telanis answered him. “We do, Guild Master. As I said, we are very thorough. But if it is as Master Geran says—and long experience would tend to bear him out—we would do well to drill sideways a way before continuing our ascent. After all, why go courting trouble?”

“So how long will this…*detour* take?”

Telanis smiled pleasantly. “A week. Maybe two.”

Kedri looked far from pleased, yet he said nothing. Relieved, Telanis looked to Geran once more.

“In the circumstances I approve your recommendation, Master Geran. We shall move back and across. Arrange the survey at once.”

Geran smiled. “I shall do it myself, Guild Master.”

When Geran was gone, Telanis looked across at Aitrus.

“Aitrus, step forward.”

Aitrus crossed the narrow cabin, taking the place Geran had just vacated. “Yes, Guild Master?”

“I want you to place yourself at Guild Master Kedri’s disposal for the next eleven days. I want you to show him how things work and explain to him just what we are doing. And if there’s anything you yourself are uncertain of, you will ask someone who *does* know. Understand me?”

Surprised, Aitrus nodded. “Yes, Guild Master.” Then, hesitantly, “And my experiments, Guild Master?”

Telanis looked to Kedri. “That depends upon Master Kedri. If he permits, I see no reason why you should not continue with them.”

Kedri turned to Aitrus. Experiments, Guildsman?”

Aitrus looked down, knowing suddenly that he ought not to have mentioned them. “It does not matter, Master.”

“No, Aitrus. I am interested. What experiments are these?”

Aitrus looked up shyly. “I am studying volcanic rocks, master. I wish to understand all I can about their nature and formation.”

Kedri seemed impressed. “A most worthy task, young Aitrus. Perhaps you would be kind enough to show me these experiments?”

Aitrus looked to Telanis, hoping his Master would somehow get him off the hook, but Telanis was staring at the multilayered chart Geran had given him, flipping from page to page and frowning.

Aitrus met Kedri’s eyes again, noting how keenly the other watched him. “As you wish, Guild Master.”

§

The cavern in which they rested was a perfect sphere, or would have been but for the platform on which the two excavators lay. The craft were long and sinuous, like huge, segmented worms, their tough exteriors kept buffed and polished when they were not burrowing in the rock.

Metal ladders went down beneath the gridwork platform to a second, smaller platform to which the junior members of the expedition had had their quarters temporarily removed to make way for their guests. It was to here, after a long, exhausting day of explanations, that Aitrus returned, long after most of his colleagues had retired.

There were thirty-six of them in all, none older than thirty—all of them graduates of the Academy; young guildsmen who had volunteered for this expedition. Some had given up and been replaced along the way, but more than two-thirds of the original crews remained.

Two years, four months, Aitrus thought as he sat on the edge of his bedroll and began to pull off his boots. It was a long time to be away from home. He could have gone home, of course—Master Telanis would have given him leave if he had asked—but that would have seemed like

cheating, somehow. No, an expedition was not really an expedition if one could go home whenever one wished.

Even as he kicked his other boot off, he felt the sudden telltale vibration in the platform, followed an instant or two later by a low, almost inaudible rumble. A Messenger was coming!

The expedition had cut its way through several miles of rock, up from one of the smaller, outermost caverns of D'ni. They could, of course, have gone up vertically, like a mine shaft, but so direct a route into D'ni was thought not merely inadvisable but dangerous. The preferred scheme —the scheme the Council had eventually agreed upon—was a far more indirect route, cut at a maximum of 3825 *torans*—22.032 degrees—from the horizontal. One that could be walked.

One that could also be sealed off with gates and defended.

The rumbling grew, slowly but steadily. You could hear the sound of the turbine engines now.

Slowly but surely they had burrowed through the rock, surveying each one-hundred-span section carefully before they drilled, coating the survaces with a half-span thickness of special D'ni rock, more durable than marble. Last, but not least, they fitted heavy stone brackets into the ceiling of each section—brackets that carried air from the pumping stations back in D'ni.

Between each straight-line section was one of these spherical "nodes"—these resting places where they could carry on experiments while Master Geran and his assistants charted the next stage of their journey through the earth—each node fitted with an airtight gate that could be sealed in an instant.

The rumbling grew to a roar. For a moment the sound of it filled the node, then the engines cut out and there was the downward whine of the turbines as the Messenger slowed.

Aitrus turned and stood, watching as the metal snout of the machine emerged from the entry tunnel, passing through the thick collar of the node-gate, its pilot clearly visible through the transparent front debris shield.

It was a large, tracked vehicle, its three long segments making it seem clumsy in comparison to the sleek excavators, bu as ever Aitrus was glad to see it, for besides bringing them much-needed supplies—it being

impossible to “link” supplies direct from D’ni into the tunnels—it also brought letters from home.

“Aitrus? What time is it?”

Aitrus turned. His friend Jenir had woken and was sitting up.

“Ninth bell,” he answered, bending down to retrieve his boots and pull them on again.

Others had also been woken by the Messenger’s arrival, and were sitting up or climbing from their beds, knowing there was unloading to be done.

He himself had been temporarily excused from such duties; even so, as the others drifted across to the ladders and began to ascend, he followed, curious to see if anything had come for him.

When the last Messenger had come, three days back, it had brought nothing but the Observers—those unexpected “guests” billeted upon them by the Council. Before that it had been almost three weeks since they had had contact with D’ni. Three solid weeks without news.

The Messenger had come to rest between the two excavators. Already its four-man crew were busy, running pipelines between the middle segment of their craft and the two much larger vehicles, ready to transfer its load of mechanical parts, equipment, drill bits, fuel, and cooling fluid to the excavators.

Aitrus yawned, then walked across. The young men of the Messengers Guild were of nature outward, friendly types, and seeing him, one of them hailed him.

“Ho! Aitrus! There’s a parcel for you!”

“A parcel?”

The Messenger gestured toward where one of his colleagues was carrying a large mesh basket into the forward cabin of the left-hand excavator.

Aitrus turned and looked, then hurried after, almost running into Master Telanis coming out.

“Aitrus! Why such a hurry?”

“Forgive me, Guild Master. I was told there was a parcel for me.”

“Ah,” Telanis made to walk on, then stopped, lowering his voice. “By the way, how was our guest?”

Tiring, he wanted to answer. “Curious,” he said after a moment, keeping his own voice low. “Oh, and imaginative.”

Telanis frowned. “How so?”

“It would seem we are too cautious for him, Guild Master. Our methods are, well…*inefficient.*”

Telanis considered that, then nodded. “We must talk, Aitrus. Tomorrow. Early, perhaps, before Master Kedri has need of you. There are things you need to know.”

Aitrus bowed. “I shall call on you at third bell, Master.”

“Good. Now go and see what the Messengers have brought.”

Master Tejara of the Messengers had commandeered the table in the chart room to sort out the post. Surrounded by shelves of bound surveys, he looked up from his work as Aitrus entered.

“Ah, Aitrus. And how are you today?”

“I am well, Guild Master.”

Tejara flashed a smile at him. “You’ve heard, then?”

“Master?” But Aitrus’s eyes had already gone to the large, square parcel—bound in cloth and stitched—that rested to one side of the table.

“Here,” Master Tejara said, handing it to him.

Aitrus took it, surprised by how heavy it seemed. Unable to help himself, he held it to his ear and shook it gently.

There was a gentle chime.

“Well?” Tejara said, grinning at him now. “Are you going to open it or not?”

Aitrus hesitated a moment, then set the parcel down on the table and, taking a slender chisel from his tool belt, slit open the stitching. The cloth fell back.

Inside was a tiny wooden case, the top surface of which was a sliding panel. He slid it back and looked inside.

“By the Maker!”

Aitrus reached in and drew out the delicate, golden pair of portable scales. They were perfect, the spring mechanism of the finest make, the soft metal inlaid with tiny silver D’ni numerals. Nor were they the only thing. Setting the scales down carefully, he reached in once more and took out a flat, square rosewood box the size of his palm. Opening it, Aitrus stared openmouthed at the exposed pair of D’ni geological compasses, his fingertips gently brushing the tiny crystal magnifier that enabled one to read the tiny calibrations. For a moment he simply looked, studying the

minute transparent dials and delicate adjustable attachments that overlay the simple circle of its working face, then shook his head in wonder.

"Is it your Naming Day, Aitrus?" Tejara asked.

"No," Aitrus said distractedly as he reached in a third time to lift out an envelope marked simply "Guildsman Aitrus" in an unfamiliar hand.

He frowned, then looked to Tejara, who simply shrugged. Slitting the envelope open, he took out the single sheet and unfolded it.

"*Aitrus*," it began,

> You might remember me from school days. I realize we were not the best of friends, but we were both young then and such misunderstandings happen. Recently, however, I chanced upon a report you wrote among my father's papers and was reminded of those unfortunate days, and it occurred to me that I might do something to attempt to reverse your poor opinion of me. If the enclosed gifts are unwelcome, please forgive me. But I hope you will accept them in the same spirit with which they are given. Good luck with your explorations! Yours in friendship, Veovis.

Atrus looked up, astonished to see *that* signature at the foot of the note.

"It is from Veovis," he said quietly. "Lord Rakeri's son."

Tejara looked surprised. "Veovis is your friend, Aitrus?"

Aitrus shook his head. "No. At least, he was no friend to me at school."

"Then these gifts are a surprise?"

"More a shock, to be honest, Guild Master. Yet people change, I suppose."

Tehara nodded emphatically. "You can be certain of it, Aitrus. Time teaches many things. It is the rock in which we bore."

Aitrus smiled at the old saying.

"Oh, and before I forget," Tejara added, handing him his mail, "there are three letters for you this time."

§

Aitrus lay there a long time, unable to sleep, staring at the pattern of shadows on the smooth, curved wall of the node, wondering what the gifts meant.

His letters had contained the usual, cheerful news from home—chatter about old friends from his mother, word of Council matters from his father. But his mind kept going back to the note.

That Veovis had written at all was amazing, that he had sent gifts was...well, astonishing!

And not just any gifts, but just those things that he most needed in his work.

Oh, there were plenty of scales and compasses he could use—property of the guild—but not his own. Nor were the guild's instruments anything as fine as those Veovis had given him. Why, they were as good as those that hung from Master Telanis's own tool belt!

When finally he did manage to sleep, it was to find himself dreaming of his school days, his mind, for some strange yet obvious reason, going back to a day in his thirteenth year when, tired of turning his back on Veovis's constant taunts, he had turned and fought him.

He woke to find Master Telanis shaking him.

"Come, Aitrus. Third bell has sounded. We need to talk."

§

The cabin door was locked. Master Telanis sat behind his desk, looking up at Aitrus.

"Well, Aitrus, how did you fare with Master Kedri?"

Aitrus hesitated, not sure how much to say. The truth was he did not like the task he had been given. It made him feel *uncomfortable.*

Telanis coaxed him gently. "You said he felt our methods were inefficient."

"Oh, indeed, Guild Master. He constantly commented upon how slow our methods are. How overcautious."

"And do you agree with him, Aitrus? Do you think, perhaps, that we *are* too pedantic in our ways?"

"Not at all, Guild Master. There is, after all, no hurry. Whether we reach the surface this year or next does not matter. Safety must be our first concern."

Telanis stared at him a moment, then nodded. "Good. Now let me tell you a few things, Aitrus. First, I am aware that this task is not really to

your liking."

Aitrus made to object, but Telanis raised a hand. "Make no mistake, Aitrus. I realize ou are not at ease looking after Master Kedri, but I chose you for a reason. The good Master seeks to sound us out on certain topics—to *survey* our attitudes, if you like."

Aitrus looked horrified at the thought. "Should I watch what I say, Master?"

"Not at all, Aitrus. I have no fear that you will say anything that might upset Master Kedri. That is why I chose you. You are like basalt, Aitrus, solid through and through. But it would help me if, at the end of each day, you would note down those areas in which Master Kedri seemed most interested."

Aitrus hesitated. "Might I ask why, Master?"

"You may. But you must keep my answer strictly to yourself." Telanis paused, steepling his fingers before his chin. "There is to be a meeting of the Council, a month from now. It seems that some of the older members have had a change of heart. They have thought long and hard about whether we should make contact with the surface dwellers or not, and a few of them now feel it might not be quite so good an idea as it first seemed. Indeed, they might even ask us to abandon the expedition."

Unable to help himself, Aitrus slammed his fist down on the desk. "But they *can't!*"

Master Telanis smiled tolerantly. "If that is their final word, then so be it. We must do what they say. We cannot argue with the Council."

Aitrus lowered his head, acknowledging what Master Telanis said. The Council was the ruling body of D'ni and their word was law. His own opinion was irrelevant—it was what the five Great Lords and the eighteen Guild Masters decided that was important.

"That is why," Telanis went on, "it is so important that we impress our guests, Aitrus, for they represent the Eighteen and the Five. What they report back might yet prove crucial in swaying the decision…either for us or against us."

"I see." And suddenly he *did* see. Master Kedri was not just any busybody, butting his nose into their affairs; Kedri was a potential enemy—or ally—of the expedition. All of their hard work, their patient progress through the rock, might prove to no avail if Kedri spoke against them.

"I am not sure I can do this, Master."

Telanis nodded. “I understand. Do you want to be relieved of this duty, Aitrus?”

He stared at Master Telanis. It was as simple as that, was it? And then he understood. It was like going home. He *could* go home, at any time, but it was his choice *not* to go home that gave this voyage its meaning. So with this. He could quit, but…

Aitrus lowered his head respectfully. “I shall do as you wish, Guild Master.”

Telanis smiled broadly. “Good. Now go and eat. You have a long day ahead of you.”

§

Four long, exacting days followed, one upon another. Aitrus was ready to go back to Master Telanis and beg to be taken from his task when news came to him that they were ready to start drilling the next section.

Master Kedri was in the refectory when the news came, and, delighted that he could at last show the Legislator something real and tangible, Aitrus interrupted him at table.

“Yes, Guildsman?” Kedri said, staring at Aitrus. The conversation at table had died the moment Aitrus had stepped into the cabin. All four of the Observers seated about the narrow table had turned to stare at him.

“Forgive me, Masters,” Aitrus said, bowing to them all, “but I felt ou should know at once that we are about to commence the next stage of the excavation.”

There was at once a babble of sound from all sides. Some stood immediately and began to make their way out. Others began to hurriedly finish their meals. Only Kedri seemed unmoved by the news.

“Thank you, Aitrus,” he said after a moment. “I shall fiish my meal then join you. Wait for me at the site.”

Ten minutes later, Master Kedri stepped out of the excavator and walked across to where they had set up the sample drills. The other Observers had already gathered, waiting for operations to commence.

“Let us see if I understand this correctly,” Kedri began, before Aitrus could say a word. “Master Geran’s ‘sounding’ is a rough yet fairly accurate guide to whether the rock ahead of us is sound or otherwise,

correct? The next stage—*this* stage—is to drill a series of long boreholes to provide us with a precise breakdown of the different kinds of rock we are about to cut through."

Aitrus nodded, for the first time smiling at the Legislator.

"Oh, I can retain some minimal information, Guildsman," Kedri said, a faint amusement on his own lips. "It isn't only contracts I can read. But there is one thing you can tell me, Aitrus, and that's where all the rock goes to."

"The rock?" Aitrus laughed. "But I thought you knew, Master. I thought *everyone* knew! It is reconstituted."

"Reconstituted?"

"In the fusion-compounder. The machine reconstitutes the very matter of the rock, reforging its atomic links and thereby reducing its volume by a factor of two hundred. The result is *nara*."

"So that's what nara is!" Kedri nodded thoughtfully. "Can I *see* this fusion-compounder?"

Aitrus smiled, suddenly liking the man. "See it, Master? Why, you can operate it if you want!"

§

Aitrus took a sheet of paper and, for Master Kedri's benefit, sketched out a cross-section diagram of the tunnel.

"This," he said, indicating the small shaded circle at the very center of it, "is the hole made by the excavator. As you can see, it's a comparatively small hole, less than a third the total circumference of the tunnel. This," and he pointed to the two closely parallel circles on the outer wall of the tunnel, "is the area that the Cycler removes."

"The *Cycler?*" Kedri looked puzzled.

"That's what we call it. It's because it cuts a giant ring from the rock surrounding the central borehole."

"Ah, then that would be the big spiderlike machine, right?"

Aitrus nodded. Only two days before they had exhaustively inspected all of the different excavating tools.

"What happens is that the Cycler removes a circular track around the outer edge to a depth of one and a quarter spans. We then fill that space

with a special seal of D'ni stone, let that set, then chip out the "collar"—that is, the rock between the inner tunnel and the seal."

"Why one and a quarter?"

Aitrus sketched something on the pad, then handed it across. "As you can see, we insert a special metal brace a quarter of a span wide, deep in the cut, then pour in the sealant stone. Then, when the collar has been chipped away, we remove the brace and set up the Cycler ready to start all over."

Kedri frowned. "Forgive me, Guildsman, but once again it seems a most laborious way of going about things."

"Maybe so, Master Kedri, but safe. When we make a tunnel, we make it to last."

"Yes…" Kedri nodded thoughtfully. "Still, it seems a lot of effort merely to talk to a few surface-dwellers, don't you think?"

It was the first direct question of that type Kedri had asked him, and for a moment Aitrus wondered if he might not simply ignore it, or treat it as rhetorical, but Kedri, it seemed, was waiting for an answer.

"Well, Guildsman? Have you *no* opinion on the matter?"

Master Telanis came to his rescue.

"Forgive me, Master Kedri. Guildsman Aitrus might well have an opinion, but I am sure he would be the first to admit that at twenty-five he is far too young and inexperienced to express it openly. However, if you would welcome the opinion of someone of greater years?"

Kedri laughed. "Oh, I know *your* opinion, Master Telanis. I simply thought it would be refreshing to seek a different, *younger* view on things."

"Oh, come now, Kedri, do you really think our Masters on Council would be in the least interested in what a young guildsman—even one as brilliant as Aitrus here—has to say? Why, Lord Tulla is near on eleven times young Aitrus's age! Do you think *he* would be interested?"

Kedri bowed his head, conceding the point.

"Then let us proceed with more important matters," Telanis continued quickly, before Kedri might steer the conversation back onto more tricky ground. "Normally we would take bore samples at this stage, but as you are so keen to see us in action, Master Kedri, I have decided to waive those for once and go direct to drilling."

The news seemed to cheer Kedri immensely. “Excellent!” he said, rubbing his hands together. “Will we need proective clothing of any kind?”

Master Telanis shook his head. “No. But you will need to be inside the second craft. When we drill, we drill!”

§

The node-gate was closed behind them, its airtight seal ensuring that not a single particle of rock would escape back down the tunnel. The temporary camp had been packed up and stored; the sounding capsule attached to the back of the second excavator, which now rested against the back wall of the node, slightly to the left of the bore-site. Two large observation lenses had been mounted on the ceiling to either side of the site, high up so that they’d not be hit by flying rock.

All was now ready. Master Telanis had only to give the order.

Aitrus was in the second vehicle, standing at the back of the chart room behind the Observers, who looked up at the big screen, watching as the excavator was maneuvered into place.

In operation it seemed more like something living than a machine, its sinuous, quiet movements like those of a giant snake.

Aitrus looked on with quiet satisfaction. He had first seen an excavator in action when he was four—when his father, a guildsman before him—had taken him to see the cutting of a new tunnel between the outer caverns.

Kedri, in particular, seemed impressed. He was leaning forward, staring at the screen in fascination.

“In place!” Master Telanis called out, his voice transmitted into the chart room where they sat. A moment later a siren sounded, its whine rising and then falling again.

The snout of the excavator came around and seemed almost to kiss the bore-mark on the rock face, so gentle was its touch, but the great drill bit had a brutal look to it, and as they watched, they saw the cooling fluid begin to dribble down the thick grooves of the drill.

Slowly the drill began to turn, nudging blindly into the rock, the mechanical whirr of its slow spiral accompanied by a deeper, grinding

sound that seemed to climb in pitch as the bit whirred faster and faster until it was a squeal, great clouds of dust billowing out from all around it.

The noise was now deafening, the vibrations making the second excavator ring like a struck bell. Slowly the great sphere of the node filled with dust, partly obscuring their view. Yet every now and then they would glimpse the excavator again, each time buried deeper and deeper into the rock, like some ferocious, feral animal boring into the soft flesh of its victim.

From time to time there would be a clang or thud as a large fragment of rock struck their craft, but there was no danger—the excavators were built to withstand massive pressures. Even a major collapse would merely trap the machine, not crush it.

After a while, Kedri turned and looked to Aitrus. “It’s a fearsome sight,” he said, raising his voice above the din.

Aitrus nodded. The first time he had seen it he had felt a fear deep in the pit of his stomach, yet afterward, talking to his father, he had remembered it with wonder and a sense of pride that this was what his guilds-people did.

Perhaps it was even that day when he had decided to follow his father into the Guild of Surveyors.

“Watch the tail,” he shouted, indicating the screen as, briefly, the excavator came into view again. It was almost wholly in the rock now, yet even as they watched, the tail end of the craft began to lash from side to side—again like a living thing—scoring the smooth-bored wall of the tunnel with tooth-shaped gashes.

“Why does it do that?” Kedri shouted back.

“To give our men a purchase on the wall. Those gashes are where we begin to dig out the collar. It makes it much easier for us!”

Kedri nodded. “Clever. You think of everything!”

Yes, Atrus thought, but then we have had a thousand generations to think of everything.

§

In the sudden silence, the excavator backed out of the hole, its segmented sides coated in dust, its drill head glowing red despie the

constant stream of coolant. Inside the node the dust was slowly settling.

"Can we go outside and see for ourselves now?" One of the other Observers, Ja'ir, a Master in the Guild of Writers asked.

"I am afraid not," Aitrus answered him. "It is much too hot. Besides, you would choke on the dust. Even our men will have to wear breathing suits for a while. No, first they will have to spray the node with water to settle the dust. Then, once the drill bit has cooled a little, we shall start pumping air back into the node from outside. Only then will they start the clearing up process."

"And the next stage of drilling?" Kedri asked, turning fully in his seat and leaning over the back of the chair to stare at Aitrus.

"That begins almost at once, Master," Aitrus answered. "Look."

Even as he spoke, a door opened in the side of the excavator and two young guildsmen stepped out, suited-up, air canisters feeding the sealed helmets they were wearing. They were both carrying what looked like spears, only these spears were curved and had sharp, diamond tips at the end.

"They'll set the Cycler up straight away. We should be able to start the second stage of drilling as soon as that's done. Meanwhile, the rest of the men will begin the clearing up operation."

As the two suited guildsmen began to put together the great cutting hoop of the Cycler, two more stepped out, trailing flaccid lengths of hose behind them. Getting into position in the center of the platform, one of them turned and gave a hand signal. Almost at once the hoses swelled and a jet of water gushed from each, arching up into the ceiling of the great sphere. As the two men adjusted the nozzles of their hoses, the fountain of water was transformed into a fine mist that briefly seemed to fill the node.

It lasted only a minute or two, but when the water supply was cut, the node was clear of dust, though a dark paste now covered every surface.

Aitrus smiled. "If you ever wondered what we surveyors do most of the time, it's this. Cleaning up!"

There was laughter.

"You talk as if you dislike the job, Aitrus," Kedri said with a smile.

"Not at all. It gives me time to think."

Kedri stared at him a moment, a thoughtful expression in his eyes, then he turned back, leaving Aitrus to wonder just what was going on inside the Legislator's head.

§

The four Observers stepped out from the excavator, their movements slightly awkward in the unfamiliar protective suits Master Telanis had insisted they wear. Kedri, as ever, led the way, Aitrus at his side as they stepped over to the tunnel's mouth.

The Cycler had done its job several times already and the cadets had already chipped out a section twenty spans in length and sprayed it with a coating of D'ni stone. Further down the tunnel, they could see the dark O of the central borehole running straight into the rock and, surrounding it like some strange, skeletal insect, the Cycler, encased in its translucent sheath.

Two brightly glowing fire-marbles the size of clenched fists were suspended from the ceiling. In their blazing blue-white light a number of cadets loaded rock onto a mobile trailer.

"This is more like it," Kedri said, with an air of satisfaction. "This is just how I imagined it."

They walked slowly toward the lamps. Surrounding them, the finished section of the tunnel had the look of permanence. Moving past the young guildsmen, they approached the rock face, stopping beneath the anchored feet of the Cycler.

They looked up, past the sleek engine of the Cycler to where its great revolving hoop was at rest against the face. The transparent sheath surrounding the Cycler was there to catch the excavated rock and channel it down into a chute that fed straight into the central borehole. From there the cadets would collect it up, using great suction hoses, and feed it into the pulverizer.

Kedri looked to Aitrus. "You remember your promise, Aitrus?"

"I have not forgotten."

"Then what are we waiting for?"

Aitrus turned and signaled to his friend, Efanis, who was working nearby. At once, Efanis came across and, positioning himself at the controls of the Cycler, gave two long blasts on the machine's siren.

Kedri made a face. "Yours must be the noisiest of guilds, young Aitrus. It seems you do nothing without a great blast of air beforehand!"

Aitrus smiled. It was true. If anyone was up there, they would surely hear them long before they broke through to the surface.

"If you would make sure your masks are kept down, Masters," he said, looking from one to another. "It should be perfectly safe, but if the sheath was to be punctured your headgear should protect you."

"Cautious," Kedri muttered. "Ever cautious!"

Slowly the great cutting-hoop of the Cycler began to spin, slowly at first, then faster, at first only skimming the surface of the rock, whistling all the while. Then, abruptly, the whole top of the Cycler seemed to lean into the rock face, a great grinding buzz going up as if a thousand swarms of bees had all been released at once.

Chips of rock flew like hailstones against the clear, thick surface of the sheath. Slowly the arm of the Cycler raised on is hydraulics, moving toward the horizontal as the spinning cutting hoop bit deeper and deeper into the rock, carving its great O, like the outer rim of an archery target.

In less than three minutes it was done. Slowly the machine eased back, the hoop slipping from the rock, its surface steaming hot. As the Observers turned, four of the young Surveyors wheeled the great metal hoop of the brace down the tunnel toward them. They had seen already how it was mounted on the cutting hoop, then pushed into place.

So easy it seemed, yet every stage was fraught with dangers and difficulties.

As the guildsmen took over, removing the covering sheath and fitting the brace, Kedri and his fellows stood back out of their way. Only when they were finished and the brace was in place did Aitrus take them through, past the base of the Cycler and into the central borehole. It was darker here, but the piles of rock stood out against the light from outside.

Aitrus pointed to two machines that stood to one side. The first was recognizably the machine they used to gather up all the fragments of rock, a great suction hose coiling out from the squat, metallic sphere at its center. The second was small and squat, with what looked like a deep, wedge-shaped metal tray on top.

Ignoring the rock-gatherer, Aitrus stooped and, picking up one of the larger chunks of rock, handed it to Kedri. "Well, Guild Master? Do you want to feed the compounder?"

Kedri grinned and, taking the rock over to the machine, dropped it into the tray.

“What now?” he asked, looking to Aitrus.

In answer, Aitrus stepped up and pressed a button on the face of the fusion-compounder. At once a metal lid slid across over the tray. There was a low, grinding sound, and then the lid slid back. The tray was now empty.

“And the nara?”

Aitrus crouched and indicated a bulky red cylinder that rested in a mesh cage on the underside of the machine.

“The nara is kept in there,” Aitrus said, “in its basic, highly compacted form, until we need to use it.”

“But surely it would just…solidify!”

Aitrus nodded. “It does. The cylinder is just temporary; a kind of jacket used to mold the nara into a storable form. When we have enough of the nara, we load up another machine with the cylinders. In effect, that machine is little more than a large pressure-oven, operating at immensely high pressures, within which the cylinders are burned away and the nara brought back to a more volatile, and thus usable, state.”

“The sprayer, you mean?” Kedri said, staring at Aitrus in open astonishment.

Aitrus nodded.

Kedri crouched, staring at the bright red cylinder in awe, conscious of the immense power of these simple-seeming machines, then, like a school-boy who has been briefly let off the leash, he straightened up and, looking about him, began to gather up rocks and feed into the machine.

§

That night Master Telanis took Aitrus aside once more.

“I hear our friends enjoyed themselves today. That was a good idea of yours to let them operate a few of the less dangerous machines. They’re bookish types, and such types are impressed by gadgetry. And who knows, even something this small may serve to sway them for the good.”

“Then you think it *is* good?”

“Making contact with the surface-dwellers?” Telanis smiled. “Yes. Just so long as it is done discreetly.”

Aitrus frowned. “How do you mean?”

“I mean, I do not think we should mix our race with theirs. Nor should we think of any extended relationship with them. They are likely, after all, to be a primitive race, and primitive races—as we have learned to our cost—tend to be warlike in nature. It would not do to have them pouring down our tunnels into D’ni.”

“But what kind of relationship does that leave us?”

Telanis shrugged, then. “We could go among them as Observers. That is, providing we are not too dissimilar from them as a species.”

‘But why? What would we learn from doing that?”

“They might have certain cultural traits—artifacts and the like—that we might use. Or they might even have developed certain instruments or machines, though, personally, I find that most unlikely.”

“It seems, then, that Master Kedri is right after all, and that ours is something of a fool’s errand.”

Master Telanis sat forward, suddenly alert. “Are those his words?”

“Something like. It was something he was saying to one of the other Observers—Ja’ir, I think—as they were coming away from the rock face. Ja’ir was wondering aloud whether there was anyone up there on the surface anyway.”

“And?”

Aitrus paused, trying to recall the conversation. “Master Kedri was of the opinion that there would be. His view was that the climatic conditions are ideal for the development of an indigenous species.”

“And on what did he base this claim?”

“It seems that all four of them have seen copies of the Book.”

“The Book of Earth,” Telanis said, nodding thoughtfully. “It was written by Grand Master Ri’Neref himself, Aitrus, perhaps the greatest of the ancient Writers. Yet it is said that it was one he wrote as an apprentice.”

“So Master Kedri also claimed. Yet most troubling, perhaps, was what Master Ja’ir said next.”

Telanis’s eyes seemed to pierce Aitrus. “Go on.”

“Ja’ir said that whether there was a humanoid race up there on the surface or not he nevertheless wondered whether so much time and effort ought to have been spent on such a speculative venture.”

“Speculative…he said speculative, did he?”

Aitrus nodded.

Master Telanis sat back and stared thoughtfully. For a while he did not speak, then, looking at Aitrus, he asked, “And what do you think, Aitrus? Is it worth it?”

“Yes, Guild Master. To know for certain that we are sharing a world with another intelligent species—that surely is worth twice the time and effort that we have given it!”

§

While the excavation was in process, the young guildsmen had been permitted to return to their quarters on the ships, while the Observers had been moved into the Guild Master’s cabin in the second excavator.

Aitrus returned to his bunk. Briefly he smiled, thinking of Kedri’s comment, but the smile quickly faded. The endless secondary process of clearing up normally gave him time to think of his experiments, something he had little time to do these past few days. Indeed, it made him wonder how others could stand to live as Kedri so clearly lived, constantly in someone else’s pocket.

Personally, he needed space, and quiet. Yes, and an adequate supply of chemicals and notebooks! he thought, recollecting how his mother used to tease him about his obsession with rocks and geological processes.

Unnatural, she had said, but the old cook, Master Jerahl, was right, there was nothing more natural for a D’ni. Stone was their element.

As he sat on the edge of his bunk, he could hear the whine of drills and the sudden crunch as rock fell to the floor. Let others think birdsong and the sound of a river flowing were natural; for him, this was the most natural of sounds.

“Young worm,” his father had called him as a child, as if anticipating his future calling, and so he had become. A burrower. A seeker of passages. An explorer of the dark.

Aitrus stood, meaning to undress for sleep, when there came the sound of a commotion outside. He hurried along the corridor and poked his head out, looking about him. It was coming from inside the tunnel. The sound of a human in pain.

He heard a scuffling behind him. A moment later, Master Telanis joined him in the doorway.

“What is it, Aitrus?”

“Someone’s hurt.”

The two men ran across. At the tunnel’s mouth, one of the young engineers met them, his face distraught.

“Who is it, Ta’nerin?” Telanis asked, holding his arms.

“It’s Efanis. The cutting tip shattered. He’s badly hurt. We’ve tried to staunch the blood but we can’t stop it!”

“Fetch Master Avonis at once. I’ll see what I can do!”

Letting Ta’nerin go, Master Telanis ran, Aitrus close behind. The tunnel was almost finished now. Only the last 5 spans remained uncut. There, at the far end, beneath the burning arc lamps, they could see a small group of cadets gathered—some kneeling, some standing—around one of their colleagues.

The moaning grew—an awful, piteous sound.

As the two men came up, they saw just how badly Efanis was injured. The wound was awful. The shattered tip must have flown back and hit Efanis full in the chest and upper arm. He had not stood a chance. Even as they stood there he gave a great groan. Blood was on his lips.

Pushing between the guildsmen, Master Telanis tore off his shirt and poked it into the wound. Then, looking about him, he spoke urgently, trying to rouse them from their shock. “Help me, then, lads! Quick now!” And, reaching down, he gently cradled Efanis’s head even as the others crowded around, putting their hands under Efanis’s shoulders and back and thighs.

“That’s good,” Telanis said softly, encouraging them as they gently lifted the groaning Efanis. “Now let’s get him back to the excavator. The sooner Master Avonis gets to look at him, the better.”

§

There had been accidents before, but never anything more severe than broken bones, or bruising, or rock splinters. Master Telanis prided himself on his safety record. Efanis’s accident had thus come as a great shock.

When Aitrus reported to Kedri the next morning, it was to find the Legislator crouched over a desk in the chart room, writing. He looked up as Aitrus entered and put down his pen.

"I'm sorry, Aitrus. I understand that Efanis was your friend. A bad business, eh?"

Aitrus nodded, but he felt unable to speak. Efanis was not yet out of trouble.

"I'll not be needing you today, Aitrus, so take the day off. Do your experiments, if you wish. We'll carry on tomorrow."

"Yes, Master."

Leaving Kedri to his work, Aitrus went straight to Master Telanis. He found him in the tunnel, crouching beside the temporarily abandoned excavation, staring at a dark patch in the rock. At the center of that small, irregular ovoid was a tiny, slightly flattened circle of what looked like glass.

It had the look of a bruised eye staring from the rock.

"What is that?" Aitrus asked.

Telanis looked up at him. "It appears to be a pyroclastic deposit—a 'volcanic bomb' deposited in this strata hundreds of millions of years ago." The Guild Master pointed to the outer, darker area. "The outside of it is simple obsidian—a glassy basalt—but this pellucid nugget here was already embedded within it when the volcano spat it out. It looks and feels like diamond."

Aitrus nodded.

"My guess," Telanis continued, "is that the cutting tip slipped on the glassy surface, then snagged on this much harder patch here and shattered."

He sighed heavily. "I should have taken core samples, Aitrus. I was in too much of a hurry to impress our guests. And now *this* has come of it."

"You cannot blame yourself, Guild Master," Aitrus said. "The bit must have been flawed, anyway. One cannot foresee everything."

"No?" Telanis stood. He looked about him at the abandoned tools, his eyes, for the first time that Aitrus could recall, troubled by what he saw. "If not me, then who, Aitrus? It is *my* job to ensure the safety of my crews, *my* responsibility, no one else's. That Efanis is hurt is my fault. If I had done my job properly…"

Aitrus put out his hand to touch his Master's arm, then withdrew it. In a sense Telanis was right. All of their patient checks and procedures were designed to avoid an event like this.

He cleared his throat. "Master Kedri says he does not need me today, Guild Master. I came to be reassigned."

Telanis glanced at him, then made a vague gesture with his hand. "Not now, Aitrus. We'll do no work today."

"But, Master…"

"Not now."

§

Aitrus packed a knapsack for the journey and set off, walking back down the nodes to where—almost two months before—they had drilled through a small cave system.

Though they had labored long and hard in the rock, it took but an hour or so to reach his destination. For the first part the way was fairly straightforward, zigzagging back and forth in the normal D'ni way, but then it branched to the left, where they had been forced to detour around an area of folds and faults.

His way was dimly lit. Chemicals in the green-black coating of D'ni rock gave off a faint luminescence bright enough to see in. But Aitrus had packed two lamps and a small canister of luminescent algae for when he left the D'ni path.

Coming to his destination, he rested briefly, seated on the rock ledge outside the circular door that led through into the cave system, and ate a brief meal.

The sphere of this node had been peppered with openings—some tiny apertures barely large enough to poke one's hand into, others big enough to walk inside. One—the one he now sat outside—had been large enough to drive the excavator inside. Indeed, with Master Telanis's permission, they had shored up the entrance and bored almost fifty spans into the rock, widening the passageway to give access to a large cavern that lay just beyond. But time had been pressing and they had not had more than a day or two to explore the system before they had had to press

on with their excavations. They had sealed the tunnel with a small gate—similar to those that linked the nodes to the lengths of D'ni tunnel—leaving the caverns for future investigation, then they had sprayed the rest of the node with a smooth coating of nara.

Aitrus had made extensive notes of the cave system at the time. Now he had the chance to go back and resume his explorations. The thought of it cheered him as, finishing his meal, he stood and, taking the protective helmet from his pack, he strapped it on and, slipping the sack onto his shoulder, walked over to the lock.

It was a simple pressure lock. Turning the wheel, he could hear the air hiss out from the vent overhead. A moment later a crack appeared down the very center of the door and the two halves of it slid back into the surrounding collar.

Inside was darkness.

In a small cloth bag he carried in his pocket he had a collection of fire-marbles. Taking one from the bag, he opened the back of the lamp mounted on his helmet and popped it into the tiny space. Clicking it shut, he waited for a moment until the fire-marble began to glow. After less than a minute a clear, strong white radiance shone out from the lamp into the darkness, revealing the smooth, uncoated walls of rock within.

Atrus smiled, then stepped inside.

§

Aitrus paused to spray a tiny arrow on the rock wall, pointing back the way he had come, then slipped the canister away and walked slowly on, counting each step, all the time turning his head from side to side, scanning the walls and floor ahead of him.

After a moment he stopped again and took his notebook from his pocket, quickly marking down how many paces he had come before checking his compass again to see if the tunnel had diverged from its slow descent.

It was a narrow passageway, one they had not explored the first time he had been here. Overhead it tapered to a crack that seemed to go some way into the rock, but it was barely wide enough to walk down, and it was slowly narrowing. Up ahead, however, it seemed to emerge into a

larger space—a small cavern, perhaps—and so he persevered, hoping he might squeeze through and investigate.

The rock was silent. There were no waterflows here, no steady drip from unseen heights, only the absence of sound. He was the intruder here, the noise of his own breathing loud in his ears. It was warm in the rock and he felt no fear. Since he'd been a child and his father had first taken him deep inside the rock, he had felt no fear. What he felt, if anything, was a tiny thrill of anticipation.

There was hidden beauty in the rock. Locked deep within the earth were caverns of such delicate, shimmering beauty that, to step out into them, was a joy beyond all measuring.

Taking his sack from his shoulders, he dropped it softly onto the floor of the passage, then turned and began to squeeze into the narrow space. Breathing in, he found he could just slip through.

He turned, then grabbed hold of the rock beside him. Just below him the rock fell away into a narrow chasm. To his left it climbed to meet a solid wall of rock. But to his right…

Aitrus grinned. To his right, just beyond the gap, the cavern opened out. Points of shimmering crystal seemed to wink back at him as he turned his head. The roof of the cavern was low, but the cave itself went back some way, a huge, pillarlike outcrop of rock concealing what lay at the far end.

Aitrus turned and, squeezing back through, retrieved his sack. By the timer on his wrist he had been gone from the base-node almost three hours, but there was still plenty of time. Securing the strap of the sack about his wrist, he edged through the gap again, standing on the lip of the entrance hole.

The gap seemed deep, but he could jump it at a stride. The trouble would be getting back, as the floor of the cave was much lower than where he stood. It would not be so easy leaping up onto this ledge.

Taking a length of rope from his sack, Aitrus hammered a metal pin into the rock beside him and tied one end of the rope fast about it. He uncoiled the rope, letting two or three spans of it hang down, then jumped down.

For a moment he looked about him, his eyes searching for a chunk of loose stone to lay upon the end of the rope to keep it in place, but there was nothing. The rock was strangely fused here and glassy. Aitrus coiled

the end of the rope and rested it on the rock, trusting that it would not slip into the gap. Then, straightening up, he turned to face the cavern.

For a moment Aitrus held himself perfectly still, the beam of light from his lamp focused on the pillar at the far end of the cavern, then he crouched and, again taking his notebook from his pocket, rested it on his knee, and began to sketch what he saw.

Finished, he began to walk across. The floor was strangely smooth and for a moment Aitrus wondered if he were in a volcanic chamber of some kind. Then, with a laugh, he stopped and crouched.

“Agates!” he said softly, his voice a whisper in that silent space. “Agates in the rock!”

Taking a hammer and chisel from his tool belt, Aitrus chipped at the smooth surface of the rock just to his left, then, slipping the tools back into their leather holsters, he reached down and gently plucked his find from the rock.

The agate was a tiny piece of chalcedony no bigger than a pigion’s egg. He held it up and studied it, then, reaching behind him, popped it into the sack on his back. There were others here, and he quickly chipped them from the rock. Some were turquoise, others a deep summer blue. One, however, was almost purple in color and he guessed that it was possibly an amethyst.

Aitrus smiled broadly, then stood once more. Such agates were hypabyssal—small intrusive bodies from deep in the earth’s crust that had been thrust up with the lava flow to cool at these shallow depths. In a sense they were no more than bubbles in the lava flow; bubbles that had been filled with heated groundwater. Long eons had passed and this was the form they had taken. Polished they would look magnificent.

Aitrus began to walk toward the distant pillar of rock, but he had taken no more than two paces when the floor beneath him began to tremble. At first he thought they had perhaps begun drilling again, for the source of the vibrations seemed quite distant, but then he recalled what Master Telanis had said.

We’ll do no work today…

As if to emphasize the point, the ground shuddered. There was a deep rumbling in the rock. He could hear rock falling in the passage behind him.

Aitrus walked across. If the passage collapsed, he would be trapped here, and it might be days before anyone knew where he was. He had told no one that he was off exploring.

The rope, at least, was still where he had left it. He swung across and pulled himself up onto the ledge.

There was the faintest trembling in the rock. A trickle of dust fell from a crack above him. He looked up. If there was to be a proper quake, that rock would come down.

Calming himself, Aitrus squeezed through the gap and began to walk back along the narrow rock passage. He was halfway along when the rock shook violently. There was a crashing up ahead of him, dust was in his mouth suddenly, but the passage remained unblocked.

He kept walking, picking up his pace.

The luminous arrows he had left to mark his way shone out, showing him the direction back to the node. Coming to one of the smaller caverns near the node, he found his way blocked for the first time. A fall of rock filled the end of the cavern, but he remembered that there was another way around, through a narrow borehole. Aitrus went back down the tunnel he'd been following until he found it, then crawled through on his hands and knees, his head down, the sack pushed before him. There was a slight drop on the other side. Aitrus wormed his way around and dangled his feet over the edge. He was about to drop, when he turned and looked. The slight drop had become a fall of three spans—almost forty feet. Hanging on tightly, he turned his head, trying to see if there was another way out. There wasn't. He would have to climb down the face, using metal pins for footholds.

It took him a long time, but eventually he was down. Now he only had to get back up again. He could see where the tunnel began again, but it was quite a climb, the last two spans of it vertical. There was nothing he could do; he would have to dig handholds in the rock face with a hammer.

The ascent was slow. Twice the ground shook and almost threw him down into the pit out of which he was climbing, but he clung on until things were quiet again. Eventually he clambered up into the tunnel.

If he was right, he was at most fifty spans from the gate.

Half running, he hurried down the tunnel. Here was the tiny cavern they had called The Pantry, here the one they'd called The Steps. With a

feeling of great relief, he ducked under the great slab of stone that marked the beginning of the cave system and out into the D'ni borehole.

Glancing along the tunnel, Aitrus could see at once that it had been badly damaged. The sides had been smooth and perfectly symmetrical. Now there were dark cracks all along it, and huge chunks of rock had fallen from the ceiling and now rested on the tunnel's floor.

Ignoring the feeling in the pit of his stomach Aitrus walked slowly on. He could see that the gate was closed. It would have closed as soon as the first tremor registered in its sensors. All the gates along the line, in every node, would be closed. If he could not open it he would be trapped, as helpless as if he'd stayed in the cavern where he'd found the agates.

There was a rarely used wheel in the center of the gate, an emergency pressure-release.

Bracing himself against the huge metal door, Aitrus heaved the wheel around, praying that another tremor wouldn't come.

At first nothing, then, the sound making him gasp with relief, there was a hiss of air and the door opened, its two halves sliding back into the collar of rock.

Atrus jumped through, knowing that at any moment another quake might come and force the doors to slam shut again.

After the tunnel, the node was brightness itself. Aitrus blinked painfully, then turned to look back into the borehole. As he did, the whole of the ceiling at the end came crashing down. Dust billowed toward him. At the sudden noise, the sensors in the gate were activated and the doors slammed shut, blocking out both noise and dust.

Aitrus whistled to himself, then turned, looking about him. The walls of the great sphere in which he stood were untouched—it would take a major quake to affect the support walls—but both node-gates were shut.

He would have to wait until the tremors subsided.

Aitrus sat and took his notebook from his pocket, beginning to write down all that had happened.

It was important to make observations and write down everything, just in case there was something important among it all.

Small tremors were quite common; they happened every month or so, but these were strong. Much stronger, in fact, than anything he had ever encountered.

He remembered the agates and got them out. For a while he studied them, lost in admiration. Then, with a cold and sudden clarity, he realized they were clues.

This whole region was volcanic. Its history was volcanic. These agates were evidence of countless millennia of volcanic activity. And it was still going on. They had been boring their tunnels directly through the heart of a great volcanic fault.

Stowing the agates back in the sack, Aitrus wrote his observations down, then closed the notebook and looked up.

It was at least an hour since the last tremor.

As if acknowledging the fact, the node-gates hissed and then slid open.

Aitrus stood, then picked up his sack and slung it over his shoulder. It was time to get back.

§

As Atrus stepped out from beneath the node-gate, he frowned. The base camp was strangely silent.

The two excavators remained where he had last seen them, but there was no sign of the frenetic activity he had expected after the quakes. It was as if the site had been abandoned.

He walked across, a strange feeling in the pit of his stomach, then stopped, hearing noises from the tunnel; the faintest murmur of voices, like a ritual chant.

Coming to the tunnel’s entrance, he saw them: the whole company of both ships lined up in ranks, together with the four Observers, who stood off in a tiny group to one side. The assembly stood at the far end, where the accident had happened, their heads bowed.

At once Aitrus knew. This was a ceremony to mark Efanis’s passage. He could hear the words drift back to him, in Master Telanis’s clear and solemn tones.

“In rock he lived, in rock he rests.”

And as the words faded, so Master Telanis lay the dead guildsman’s hand upon the open linking book, moving back as the body

shimmered in the air and vanished. It was now in the great burial Age of Te'Negamiris.

Aitrus bowed his head, standing where he was in the tunnel's mouth, mouthing the words of the response, along with the rest of the company.

"May Yavo, the Maker receive his soul."

Everyone was silent again, marking Efanis's passage with respect, then individual heads began to come up. Master Telanis looked across; seeing Aitrus, he came across and, placing a hand on Aitrus's arm, spoke to him softly.

"I'm sorry, Aitrus. It happened very quickly. An adverse reaction to the medication. He was very weak."

Aitres nodded, but the fact had not really sunk in. For a time, in the tunnels, he had totally forgotten about his friend.

"Are you all right?"

"I'm fine," Aitrus answered. "I went back to the cave system. There's a lot of damage there. The quakes…"

Telanis nodded. "Master Geran seems to think it is only a settling of the surrounding rock, but we need to make more soundings before we proceed. There may be some delays."

"Guild Master Kedri will not be pleased."

"No, nor his fellows. But it cannot be helped. We must be certain it is nothing critical." Master Telanis paused, then, "It might mean that Master Kedri will require your services for slightly longer than anticipated, Aitrus. Would that worry you?"

Master Telanis had said nothing about Aitrus not letting anyone know where he had gone. That, Aitrus knew, was his way. But Aitrus felt guilty about the breach, and it was, perhaps, that guilt that made him bow his head and answer.

"No, Guild Master."

§

As Master Kedri climbed up into the messenger, he turned, looked back at Aitrus, and smiled.

"Thank you, Aitrus. I shall not forget your kindness."

Aitrus returned the smile.

“And I shall not forget to deliver your letter,” Kedri added, patting the pocket of his tunic, where the letter lay.

“Thank you, Guild Master.”

Kedri ducked inside. A moment later the door hissed shut and the turbines of the craft came to life.

Aitrus stepped back, rejoining the others who had gathered to see off the Observers.

“You did well, Aitrus,” Master Telanis said quietly, coming alongside as the Messenger turned and slowly edged into the tunnel, heading back to D’ni.

“Yet I fear it was not enough,” Aitrus answered.

Telanis nodded, a small movement in his face indicating that he, too, expected little good to come of the Observers’ report.

Unexpectedly, Master Kedri and his fellows had chosen not to wait for tunneling to recommence, deciding, instead, to return at once. All there read it as a clear sign that the four men had made up their minds about the expedition.

Efanis’s death, the quakes—these factors had clearly influenced that choice—had, perhaps, pushed them to a decision.

Even so, the waiting would be hard.

“What shall we do, Guild Master?” Aitrus asked, seeing how despondent Telanis looked.

Telanis glanced at him, then shrugged. “I suppose we shall keep on burrowing through the rock, until they tell us otherwise.”

§

Progress was slow. Master Geran took many soundings over the following five days, making a great chart of all the surrounding rock, then checking his findings by making test borings deep into the strata.

It was ten full days before Master Telanis gave the order to finish off the tunnel and excavate the new node. Knowing how close the Council’s meeting now was, everyone in the expedition feared the worst.

Any day now they might be summoned home, the tunnels filled, all their efforts brought to nothing, but still they worked on, a stubborn pride

in what they did making them work harder and longer.

The advance team finished excavating and coating the sphere in a single day, while the second team laid the air brackets. That evening they dismantled the platforms and moved the base camp on.

Efanis's death had been a shock, but none there had known quite how it would affect them. Now they knew. As Aitrus's team sat there that evening in the refectory, there was a strange yet intimate silence. No one had to speak, yet all there knew what the others were feeling and thinking. Finally, the old cook, Jerahl, said it for them.

"It seems unfair that we should come to understand just how important this expedition is, only for it to be taken from us."

There was a strong murmur of agreement. Since Efanis's death, what had been for most an adventure had taken on the aspect of a crusade. They wanted now to finish this tunnel, to complete the task they had been given by the Council. Whether there was anyone up there on the surface or not did not matter now; it was the forging of the tunnel through the earth that was the important thing.

Aitrus, never normally one to speak in company, broke habit now and answered Jerahl.

"It would indeed seem ill if Eganis were to die for nothing."

Again, there was a murmur of assent from those seated about Aitrus. But that had hardly died when Master Telanis, who now stood in the doorway, spoke up.

"Then it is fortunate that the Council see fit to agree with you, Aitrus."

There was a moment's shocked silence, then a great cheer went up. Telanis grinned and nodded at Aitrus. In one hand he held a letter, the seal of which was broken.

"A special courier arrived a moment ago. It appears we have been given a year's extension!"

There was more cheering. Everyone was grinning broadly now.

"But of much greater significance," Telanis continued as the noise subsided, "is the fact that we have been given permission to build a great shaft."

"A shaft, Master?"

Telanis nodded, a look of immense satisfaction on his face. "It seems the Council are as impatient as we to see what is on the surface.

There is to be no more burrowing sideways through the rock. We are to build a great shaft straight up to the surface. We are to begin the new soundings in the morning!”

§

The moon was a pale circle in the star-spattered darkness of the desert sky. Beneath it, in a hollow between two long ridges of rock, two travelers had stopped and camped for the night, their camels tethered close by.

It was cool after the day’s excessive heat, and the two men sat side by side on a narrow ridge of rock, thick sheepskins draped over their shoulders; sheepskins that had been taken from the great leather saddles that rested on the ground just behind them.

They were traders, out of Tadjinar, heading south for the markets of Jemaranir.

It had been silent; such a perfect silence as only the desert knows. But now, into that silence, came the faintest sound, so faint at first that each of the travelers kept quiet, thinking they had imagined it. But then the sound increased, became a presence in the surrounding air.

The ground was gently vibrating.

The two men stood, looking about them in astonishment. The noise intensified, became a kind of hum. Suddenly there was a clear, pure note in the air, like the noise of a great trumpet sounding in the depths below.

Hurrying over to the edge of the rocky outcrop, they stared in wonder. Out there, not a hundred feet from where they stood, the sand was in movement, a great circle of it trembling violently as if it were being shaken in a giant sieve. Slowly a great hoop of sand and rock lifted, as if it were being drawn up into the sky. At the same time, the strange, unearthly note rose in intensity, filling the desert air, then ceased abruptly.

At once the sand dropped, forming a massive circle where it fell.

The two men stared a moment longer, then, as one, dropped onto their hands and knees, their heads touching the rock.

“Allah preserve us!” they wailed. “Allah keep us and comfort us!” From the camp behind them, the sound of the camels’ fearful braying filled the desert night.

§

Master Geran sat back and smiled, his blind eyes laughing.

“Perfect,” he said, looking to where Master Telanis stood. “I intensified the soundings. Gave the thing a real blast this time! And it worked! We have clear rock all the way to the surface!”

Telanis, who had been waiting tensely for Geran’s analysis of the sounding, let out a great sigh of relief.

“Are you saying this is it, Master Geran?”

Geran nodded. “We shall need to cut test holes, naturally. But I would say that this was the perfect site for the shaft.”

“Excellent!” Telanis grinned. For three months they had pressed on, burrowing patiently through the rock, looking for such a site. Now they had it.

“I should warn you,” Geran said, his natural caution resurfacing. “There is a large cave off to one side of the proposed excavation. But that should not affect us. It is some way off. Besides, we shall be making our shaft next to it, not under it.”

“Good,” Telanis said. “Then I shall inform the Council at once. We can get started, excavating the footings. That should take us a month, at least.”

“Oh, at least!” Geran agreed, and the two old friends laughed.

“At last,” Telanis said, placing a hand on Geran’s shoulder and squeezing it gently. “I was beginning to think I would never see the day.”

“Nor I,” Geran agreed, his blind eyes staring up into Telanis’s face. “Nor I.”

§

The preparations were extensive. First they had to excavate a massive chamber beneath where the shaft was to be. It was a job the two excavators were not really suited to, and though they began the work by

making two long curving tunnels on the perimeter, heavier cutting equipment was swiftly brought up from D’ni to carry out this task.

While this was being organized, Master Geran, working with a team of senior members of the Guild of Cartographers, designed the main shaft. This was not as simple a job as it might have appeared, for the great shaft was to be the hub of a network of much smaller tunnels that would branch out from it. Most of these were service tunnels, leading back to D’ni, but some extended the original excavation to the north.

As things developed, Master Telanis found himself no longer leading the expedition but only one of six Guild Masters working under Grand Master Iradun himself, head of the Guild of Surveyors. Other guilds, too, were now steadily more involved in the work.

Aitrus, looking on, found himself excited by all this frenetic activity. It seemed as though they were suddenly at the heart of everything, the very focus of D’ni’s vast enterprise.

By the end of the third week the bulk of the great chamber had been part-cut, part-melted from the rock, a big stone burner—a machine of which all had heard but few had ever seen in action—making the rock drip from the walls like ice before a blowtorch.

The chamber needed supporting, of course. Twenty massive granite pillars supported the ceiling, but for the walls the usual method of spray-coating would not do. Huge slabs of nara, the hardest of D’ni stones—a metallic greenish-black stone thirty times the density of steel—were brought up the line. Huge machines lifted the precast sections into place while others hammered in the securing rivets.

A single one of those rivets was bigger than a man, and more than eight thousand were used in lining the mighty walls of the chamber, but eventually it was done.

That evening, walking between the pillars in that vast chamber, beneath the stark, temporary lighting, Aitrus felt once again an immense pride in his people.

Work was going on day and night now—though such terms, admittedly, had meaning only in terms of their waking or sleeping shifts—and a large number of guildsmen had been shipped in from D’ni for the task. The first of the support tunnels, allowing them to bring in extra supplies from D’ni, had been cut, and more were being excavated. The noise of excavation in the rock was constant.

To a young guildsman it was all quite fascinating. What had for so long been a simple exploratory excavation had now become a problem in logistics. A temporary camp had been set up at the western end of the chamber and it grew daily. There were not only guildsmen from the Guild of Surveyors here now but also from many other guilds—from the Guild of Miners, the messengers, the Caterers, the Healers, the Mechanists, the Analysts, the Maintainers, and the Stone-Masons. There were even four members of the Guild of Atrists, there to make preliminary sketches for a great painting of the works.

Food, of course, could have been a problem with so many suddenly congregated there in the chamber, but the Guild of Caterers brought up two of their Books, linked to the great granary worlds of Er'Duna and Er'Jerah, and the many were fed.

Not everything, however, was quite so simple. With the chamber cut and supported, they had begun to bring in the big cutting machines.

For five full days the tunnels were closed to any other traffic as these huge, ancient mechanisms were brought up one by one from D'ni. Dismantled in the lower caverns ready for the journey, they were transported on massive half-tracked wagons and reassembled in the base chamber, beneath the eyes of the astonished young guildsmen.

There were four of these machines in all, and with their arrival, there was a sense that history was being made. Only rarely was more than a single one of these monolithic cutters brought into use; to have all four at a single site was almost unprecedented. Not since the breakthrough to the lower caverns and the opening of the Tijali Mines, eighteen centuries before, had they been found together.

The machines themselves were, in three of the four cases, much older than that. Old Stone Teeth, as it was known, was close on four thousand years old, while Rock-Biter and The Burrower were contemporaries at three thousand years—both having been built for the broadening of the Rudenna Passage. The youngest, however, was also the biggest, and had been fashioned especially for the opening of the new mines. This was Grinder, and it was to Grinder that Atrus and the rest of the young explorers were assigned.

Grinder arrived in stages. First to arrive was the Operations Cabin —the "brain" of the beast—itself four times the size of one of the excavators. Yet this, as it turned out, was the least impressive of its parts

—at least, physically. In the days that followed, two giant, jointed legs arrived, and then, in a convoy that took several hours to enter the great chamber, the eighteen sections that made up its massive trunk.

Aitrus watched in amazement as trailer after trailer rolled in, filling the whole of the northern end of the chamber. Then, when he thought no more could possibly arrive, the cutting and grinding arms turned up—six massive half-tracks bearing the load.

The job of reassembly could now begin.

For much of the following weeks, the young guildsmen found themselves playing messenger for the thousands of other guildsmen who had suddenly appeared at the site—running about the great chamber, taking endless diagrams and maps and notes from guild to guild. The rest of the time they found themselves idle spectators as slowly the big machines took form.

It was a lengthy and painstaking process.

By the end of the third week, Grinder was complete. It crouched there, its matt black shape still and silent beneath the ceiling of the chamber, like some strange cross between a toad and a crab, its huge cutting arms lowered at its sides. Like all the great machines, it was constantly updated and modified, yet its outer form was ancient.

Standing before it, Aitrus felt, for the first time in his life, how small he was compared to the ambitions of his race. Though the D'ni were longlived, the rock in which they had their being was of an age that was difficult to comprehend; yet with the use of such machines they had challenged that ancient realm, wresting a living from its bare, inhospitable grip.

Grinder was not simply a machine, it was a statement—a great shout into the rock. This was D'ni! Small, temporary creatures they might be, yet their defiance was godlike.

Turning from it, Aitrus walked out across that vast, paved floor, stepping between the massive pillars that stretched up into the darkness, then stopped, looking about him.

Grinder lay behind him now. The Burrower and Rock-Biter lay to his left, like huge black scarabs. Ahead of him was the dull red shape of Old Stone Teeth, squatting like a mantis between the pillars and the ceiling. As a child he had had an illustrated book about Old Stone Teeth, and he could vividly recall the pictures of the great machine as it leaned

into the rock, powdered rock spraying from the great vent underneath it into a succession of trailers.

And now, as an adult, he stood before it. Aitrus nodded to himself. It was only when you were up close to such machines that you could appreciate their true size and power. No illustration could possibly do justice to such machines. They were truly awesome.

That night Aitrus barely slept. Soon it would begin, and he would live to see it! This was a tale to tell one's children and one's children's children: how, in the days of old, his people had cut their way up from the depths and made a great shaft that had reached up from the darkness to the light.

The next morning Aitrus was up early, keen to start. But his masters were, as ever, in no hurry. There were test boreholes to be drilled, and rock analyses to be made. For the next few days the Guild of Analysts took over, their temporary laboratories filling the center of the chamber, their "samplers"—a dozen small, bullet-shaped, autonomous drilling machines—boring their way into the rock overhead.

For Aitrus the next few weeks were pure frustration. Much was done, yet there was still no word of when the main excavation would begin. Letters from home spoke of the excitement throughout D'ni, yet his own had waned. And he was not alone in feeling thus.

Returning to the excavator after a day of running messages, Aitrus was about to pass the Guild Master's cabin when he noted Telanis seated at his desk, his head slumped forward, covered by his hands. A single sheet of paper was on the desk before him.

"Master? Are you unwell?"

Telanis looked up. He seemed tired, his eyes glazed and dull.

"Come in and close the door, Aitrus."

Aitrus did as he was told.

"Now take a seat."

Aitrus sat, concern growing in him. Telanis was looking at him now.

"To answer your question, Aitrus, no, I am not unwell, at least, not physically. But to be true to the spirit of your question, yes. I feel an inner fatigue, a sense of …"

"Disappointment?"

Telanis's smile was weary. "I thought it would not concern me, Aitrus. I knew that at some stage the whole thing might be taken from my hands. After all, we are but servants of the Council. Yet I had not expected to feel so useless, so peripheral to events. Great things are happening, Aitrus. I had hoped…well, that perhaps it would be we few who would be the ones to make the breakthrough."

Aitrus stared at the Guild Master in astonishment. He had not even suspected that Telanis felt this way.

"It seems we were merely the pathfinders, Aitrus. Yet I, for one, had grander visions of myself. Yes, and of you crewmen, too. I saw us as explorers."

"And so we were, Master."

"Yes, and now we are redundant. Our part in things is done."

"So why do they not simply send us home to D'ni?"

In answer Telanis handed him the paper. Aitrus quickly read it then looked up, surprised. "Then it is over."

"Yes," Telanis said quietly, "but not until the day after the capping ceremony. They want us there for that. After all, it would hardly be right for us not to be there."

The slight edge of bitterness in Telanis's voice again surprised Aitrus. He had always viewed Guild Master Telanis as a man wholly without desire; a loyal servant, happy to do whatever was required of him. This tiny fit of pique—if pique it was—seemed uncharacteristic. Yet Telanis clearly felt hurt at being brushed aside.

"They will surely recognize your contribution, Guild Master."

"Maybe so," Telanis answered distractedly, "but it will not be you and I, Aitrus, who step out onto the surface. That honor will be given to others."

For a moment Telanis was silent, staring down at the letter on the desk between them. Then he looked back at Aitrus.

"Forgive me. I did not mean to unburden myself on you, Aitrus. Forget I ever said anything."

Aitrus bowed his head. "As you wish." Yet as he stood, he felt compelled to say something more. "It was not your fault, Guild Master. You led us well. None of us will ever forget it."

Telanis looked up, surprised, then looked back down again, a dark shadow appearing in his eyes. Clearly he was thinking of Efanis.

“The excavation begins tomorrow. The capping ceremony will take place a week from now. Use the time well, Aitrus. Observe what you may. It may be some time before you return here.”

§

The next morning the major excavation work began. First into action was Old Stone Tooth, the picture-book illustrations coming to life for Aitrus as he watched the huge jaws of the machine lean into the ceiling, gnawing hungrily at the dark surface, a great fall of fine-ground rock cascading from three vents in its long, segmented underside into a massive open trailer that squatted beneath the ancient machine, the gray-black heap in its giant hopper neither growing nor diminishing as the minutes passed.

The noise was deafening.

For three long hours it labored, its long legs slowly stretching, its shoulders gradually disappearing into the great hole it was making in the roof of the chamber. Finally, with a deafening hiss, the great hydraulic legs began to fold back down. It was Grinder’s turn.

As the grand old machine backed slowly into the shadows at the north end of the chamber, its massive chest stained black, its great cutting jaws still steaming, Grinder eased forward.

As the huge machine hissed violently and settled into place beneath the hole, its maintenance crew hurried across, Aitrus among them, small half-tracks bringing up the six massive stone brackets that would secure Grinder to the floor of the chamber.

In an hour it was ready. The crew moved back behind the barriers as the five-man special excavation team—their stature enlarged by the special black protective suits they wore—crossed the massive floor of the great chamber, then climbed the runged ladder that studded Grinder’s huge curved back.

Another five minutes and Grinder’s great engines roared into life. Grinder raised itself on its mighty hydraulic legs, like a toad about to leap, its four circular, slablike grinding limbs lifted like a dancer’s arms. Then, without warning, it elbowed its way into the rock.

If Old Stone Tooth had been loud, the noise Grinder made was almost unbearable. Even through the thick protective helmet and ear-mufflers he was wearing, Aitrus found himself grimacing as the high-pitched whine seemed to reach right inside him.

Slowly the jointed arms extended as the rock was worn away, until they formed a giant cross that seemed to be holding up the roof of the chamber even as it ground away at its edges. Reaching a certain point it stopped and with a huge hiss of steam the arms retracted inward.

The relief from that constant deafening noise was sweet, but it was brief. In less than a minute it started up again, as Grinder lifted slightly, repositioning its limbs, then began to cut another “step” just above the one it had already made.

And so it went on, until the great hole Old Stone Tooth had made had been extended to form a massive vault. Not that it was finished even then: There was a great deal more rock to be cut from the walls before the shaft could be clad with nara and supported with cross-struts. Before Rock-Biter and The Burrower were brought in, they had first to build a platform two-thirds of the way up the partly completed shaft. Once that was in place, Old Stone Tooth and Grinder would be lifted up onto it my means of massive winches.

And then it would begin again, the two main excavating machines taking turns carving out the main channel, while below them the two slightly smaller machines finished the job they had begun, polishing the shaft walls and cutting the steps that would spiral up the walls of the giant well.

As guildsmen from the Guild of Engineers moved into place, ready to construct the platform, the young Surveyors began to drift away, their part in things finished for a time.

Aitrus was the last to go, looking back over his shoulder as he went. Their camp was a long way down the line, and walking back, through node after node crammed with guild tents and equipment, past endless troops of guildsmen coming up from D’ni, and units of the City Guard, whose job it was to keep the traffic flowing down the tunnels, Aitrus found himself sharing Master Telanis’s feeling of disappointment that things had been taken from their hands. In the face of such awesome preparations, he saw now just how peripheral they really were to all of this.

Yes, and in six days they would be gone from here.

Aitrus sighed. His fellow Surveyors were now some way ahead of him; the murmur of their talk, their brief but cheerful laughter, drifted back to him down the tunnel. They, he knew, were keen to go home. Whether it was they or someone else who made the breakthrough to the surface did not trouble them; at least, not as it troubled Master Telanis and himself.

Yet Master Telanis was right. One ought to finish what one had begun. It seemed only fitting. And though their whole culture was one of finely drawn guild demarcations and task specialization, there had to be some areas in which pure, individual endeavor survived—and if not in the Guild of Surveyors, where else?

Stepping out under the node-gate and onto the platform where their camp was situated, Aitrus looked across at the excavators where they were parked against the north wall and smiled fondly. He was almost of a mind to ask to serve on an excavator crew again. That was, if there were to be any new explorations after this.

Seeing Aitrus, Master Telanis summoned him across, then quickly took him into his cabin. He seemed strangely excited.

“Aitrus,” he said, even before Aitrus had had a chance to take his seat, “I have news that will cheer you greatly! The Council have reconsidered their decision. They have permitted a small contingent from the exploration team to accompany the Maintainers for the breakthrough!”

Atrus grinned broadly. “Then we shall get to finish the job?”

Telanis nodded. “I have chosen six guildsmen to accompany me. You, of course, shall be among their number.”

Aitrus bowed his head. “I do not know how to thank you, Guild Master.”

“Oh, do not thank me, Aitrus. Thank your friend Veovis. It seems it was his intervention that swayed them to reconsider.”

“Veovis?” Aitrus shook his head in amazement. He had written to Veovis weeks back, thanking him for the gifts, but there had been nothing in his letter about the Council’s decision. “I do not understand.”

Telanis sat, then took a letter from the side of his desk and handed it to Aitrus. “It appears that your friend and benefactor, Veovis, has been an active member of the Council these past two months, since his father’s illness. It seems that he has the ear of several of the older members. His

suggestion that a token body of men from the Guild of Surveyors should be included was apparently unopposed." Telanis smiled. "It seems we have much to thank him for."

"I shall write again and thank him, Master."

"There is no need for that," Telanis said, taking the letter back. "Veovis will be here in person, six days from now. Indeed, we are to be honored by the presence of the full Council for the capping ceremony. I am told that every last cook in D'ni has been engaged to prepare for the feast. It should be some occasion! And all from the seed of our little venture!"

§

The next few days passed swiftly, and on the evening of the sixth day, at the very hour that the Guild of Surveyors had estimated, the great shaft was completed, the last curved section of nara lining bolted into place, the eighty great ventilation fans, each blade of which was thrice the length of a man, switched on.

It was an awesome sight. Standing on the floor of the great chamber, Aitrus felt a tiny thrill ripple through him. The great floor stretched away on all sides, its granite base paved now in marble, a giant mosaic depicting the city of D'ni at its center, the whole surrounded by a mosaic hoop of bright blue rock that was meant to symbolize the outer world that surrounded their haven in the rock. Yet, marvelous as it was, the eyes did not dwell on that but were drawn upward by the great circle of the walls that climbed vertiginously on every side, the spiral of steps like a black thread winding its way toward the distant heights.

Aitrus turned full circle, his mouth fallen open. It was said that some twenty thousand fire-marbles had been set into the walls. Each had been placed with a delicately sprung lamp that was agitated by the movement of the fans. As the great blades turned, the fire-marbles glowed with a fierce, pure light that filled the great well.

He lowered his eyes and looked across. Already the Guild of Caterers was hard at work, whole troops of uniformed guildsmen carried into the chamber massive wooden tables that would seat twenty men to a side, while others tended the ovens that had been set up all along the

southern wall, preparing for the great feast that would take place the next day.

Old Stone Tooth had been dismantled and shipped back down the line to D'ni two days back. Grinder had followed a day later. While the guildsmen set up the tables and began constructing the massive frames that would surround the central area where the feast was to be held, members of the Guild of Miners were busy dismantling Rock-Biter and The Burrower on the far side of the great chamber. By tomorrow they, too, would be gone.

Aitrus, freed from all official duties, spent his time wandering on the periphery of all this activity, watching what was happening and noting his observations in his notebook. He was watching a half-track arrive, laden high with fine linen and chairs, when two strangers approached.

"Aitrus?"

He turned. A tall, cloaked man was smiling at him. Just behind was a second, smaller man, his body partly hunched, his features hidden within the hood of his cloak.

"Forgive me," said the taller of the two, "but you are Aitrus, no? I am Veovis. I am pleased to meet you again after all these years."

Veovis was a head taller than Aitrus remembered him and broad at the shoulder. His face was handsome but in a rather stark and monumental manner—in that he was very much his father's son. As Aitrus shook the young Lord's hand, he was surprised by the smile on Veovis's lips, the unguarded look in his eyes. This seemed a very different person from the one he'd known at school all those years ago.

"Lord Veovis," he said, stowing his notebook away. "It seems I have much to thank you for."

"And D'ni has much to thank you for." Veovis smiled. "You and your fellow guildsmen, of course." He turned slightly, introducing his companion, who had now thrown back his hood. "This is my friend and chief adviser, Lianis. It was Lianis who first brought your papers on pyroclastic deposits to my attention."

Aitrus looked to Lianis and nodded, surprised to find so ancient a fellow as Veovis's assistant.

"Lianis was my father's adviser, and his father's before him. When my father fell ill, it was decided that I should keep him on as my adviser, so that I might benefit from his experience and wisdom." Veovis smiled.

“And fortunately so, for he has kept me from many an error that my youth might otherwise have led me into.”

Aitrus nodded, then looked to Lianis. “My paper was but one of many submitted from the expedition, Master Lianis, and hardly original in its ideas. I am surprised it attracted your attention.”

Lianis, it seemed, had a face that did not ever smile. He stared back at Aitrus with a seriousness that seemed etched deep into the stone of his features. “Good work shines forth like a beacon, Guildsman. It is not necessarily the originality of a young man’s work but the clarity of mind it reveals that is important. I merely marked a seriousness of intent in your writings and commented upon it to the young Lord’s father. That is my task. I claim no credit for it.”

Aitrus smiled. “Even so, I thank you, Master Lianis, and you Lord Veovis. I have found good use of the equipment you were so kind in giving me.”

“And I am glad it has found good use…though I never doubted that for an instant.”

The two men met each other’s eyes and smiled.

“And now I am afraid I must go. My father’s guildsmen await me. But I am glad I had a chance to speak with you, Aitrus. I fear there will be little time tomorrow. However, when you are back in D’ni you must come and visit me.”

Aitrus bowed his head. “My Lord.”

Veovis gave the faintest nod, then, with a glance at Lianis, the two walked on, their cloaked figures diminishing as they crossed the great floor.

Aitrus stared a moment, then, with a strange sense of something having begun, took his notebook from his pocket and, turning to that day’s entries, wrote simply:

Met Veovis again. He has changed. The man is not the child he was. He asked me to visit him in D’ni. He paused, then added, We shall see.

Closing the book, he slipped it back into his pocket, then, turning on his heel, hurried across, heading for the bright circle of the exit tunnel.

§

The great feast to celebrate the cutting of the great shaft was almost over. Young guildsmen from the Guild of Artists looked on from the edge of events, hurriedly sketching the scene as the great men said their farewells to each other.

It had been an extraordinary occasion, with speeches and poems in honor of this latest venture of the D'ni people. A year from now a whole series of new canvases and tapestries would hang in the corridors of the Guild House back in D'ni, capturing the occasion for posterity, but just now the Grand masters talked of more mundane affairs. Matters of State stopped for no man and no occastion—even one so great as this—and there was ever much to be discussed.

It was not often that one saw all eighteen major Guilds represented in a single place, and the colorful sight of their distinctive ceremonial cloaks—each Guild's color different, each cloak decorated with the symbols that specified the rank and status of the guildsman who wore it—gave Aitrus an almost childish delight. Such things he had only glimpsed in books before now.

Aitrus's own cloak, like those of all young guildsmen without rank, had eight such symbols, four to each side, beneath the lapels, whereas those of the great Lords had but a single one.

Looking on from where he sat on the far side of the feasting circle, Aitrus saw Veovis rise from his seat to greet one of the Great Lords, his friendly deference making the old man smile. Four of the Five were here today, the fifth—Veovis's father—being too ill to come. All eighteen of the Grand Masters were also here, to represent their guilds, along with several hundred of their most senior Masters, every one of them resplendent in their full Guild colors.

To a young guildsman, they seemed an impressive host. Lord Tulla, it was said, was 287 years old, and his three companions—the Lords R'hira, Nehir, and Eneah—were all well into their third century. Veovis, by comparison, was a babe—a glint of sunlight against dark shadow. Lord Tulla, in particular, looked like something carved, as if, in the extremity of age, he had become the rock in which he had lived all his life.

One day, perhaps, Aitrus too might become a Grand Master, or perhaps even one of the Five, yet the road that led to such heights was long

and hard, and some days he wondered if he had the temperament.

If this expedition had proved one single thing to him it was that he was of essence a loner. He had thought, perhaps, that such close proximity to his fellows, day in, day out, might have brought him out of his shell—rounding off the hard edges of his nature—but it had not proved so. It was not that he did not get on with his fellow cadets—he liked them well enough and they seemed to like him—it was simply that he did not share their pursuits, their constant need for small distractions.

You were born old, Aitrus, his mother had so often said. Too old and too serious. And it had worried him. But now he knew he could not change what he was. And others, Master Telanis among them, seemed to value that seriousness. They saw it not as a weakness but a strength.

Even so, he wondered how well he would settle back into the life of the Guild House. It was not the work—the studying and practicals—that concerned him but the personal element. Watching the great men at the feast had reminded him of that, of the small, personal sacrifices one made to be a senior Guildsman.

Given the choice, Aitrus would have spent his whole life exploring; drilling through the rock and surveying. But that, he understood, was a young man's job, and he would not be a young man all his life. In time he would be asked to take charge; of small projects at first, but then steadily larger and larger tasks, and in so doing he would have to deal not with the dynamics of rock—the certainties of weight and form and pressure—but with the vagaries and inconsistencies of personality.

He looked across, catching Telanis's eye. The Guild Master smiled and raised the silver goblet he was holding in a toast. Aitrus raised his own uncertainly but did not sip. Many of his companions were drunk, but he had not touched even a drain of the strong wine he had been served.

Indeed, if the choice had been given him, he would have left an hour back, after the last speech, but it was not deemed polite for any of them to leave before their Masters. And so they sat, amid the ruins of the feast, looking on as the old men went from table to table.

"Look!" someone whispered to Aitrus's right. "The young Lord is coming over here!"

Aitrus looked up to see Veovis making his way across. Seeing Aitrus, Veovis smiled, then turned to address Telanis. "Master Telanis, might I have a word in private with Guildsman Aitrus?"

“Of course,” Telanis answered, giving the slightest bow of respect.

Aitrus, embarrassed by the sudden attention, rose and made his way around the table to where Veovis stood.

“Forgive me, Aitrus,” Veovis began, keeping his voice low. “Once more I must rush off. But Lord Tulla has given me permission to stay on an extra day. I thought we might talk. Tomorrow, after the breaching.”

The “breaching” was a small ceremony to mark the commencement of the breakthrough tunnel.

Aitrus nodded. “I’d welcome that.”

“Good.” Briefly Veovis held his arm, then, as if he understood Aitrus’s embarrassment, let his hand fall away. “Tomorrow, then.”

§

That evening they winched the excavator up onto the platform at the very top of the great shaft. Aitrus, standing beside Master Telanis, watched as it was lowered onto the metal grid, feeling an immense pride at the sight of the craft. Its usefulness as a cutter was marginal now—other machines, much larger and more efficient were already in place, ready to cut the final tunnel from the rock—yet it would serve as their quarers in this final leg of their journey.

Earlier, Master Telanis had given a moving speech as he said farewell to those cadets who would be returning to D’ni in the morning. Only Master Geran, Aitrus, and five others remained; their sole task now to represent their Guild when finally they broke through to the surface.

“How long will it take?” he asked, looking to Telanis.

The Guild Master’s attention was on the excavator, as strange hands removed the winch chains and began to lift the craft so they could extricate the great cradle from beneath it. His eyes never leaving that delicate task, Telanis answered Aitrus quietly.

“A week. Maybe less. Why? Are you impatient, Aitrus?”

“No, Master.”

‘Good. Because I would hate you to be disappointed.”

“I do not understand, Master.”

Telanis glanced at him. “The tunnel will be cut. But whether we shall ever step out onto the surface is another matter. There will be one

final meeting of the Council to decide that."

Aitrus felt a strange disturbance—a feeling almost of giddiness—at the thought of coming so close and never actually stepping out onto the surface of the world.

"I thought it had been decided."

Telanis nodded vaguely. "So did I. Yet it is an important matter—perhaps the most important they have had to debate for many centuries. If they are wrong, then D'ni itself might suffer. And so the Council deliberate until the last. Why, even today, at the feast, they were still discussing it even as they congratulated one another!"

"And if they decide not to?"

Telanis turned and met his eyes. "Then we go home, Aitrus."

"And the tunnel?"

"Will be sealed. At least, this top part of it. It is unlikely that the surface-dwellers have the technology to drill down into the shaft, even if they were to locate it.

"I see."

"No, Aitrus. Neither you nor I see, not as the Great Lords see. Yet when their final word comes, whatever it may be, we shall do as they instruct."

"And what do *you* think, master? Do you think they will let us contact the surface-dwellers?"

Telanis laughed quietly. "If I knew that, Aitrus, I would be a Great Lord myself."

§

That night Aitrus woke to find the platform trembling, as if a giant gong had been struck in the depths. All about him people slept on drunkenly, unaware of the faint tremor. After a while it subsided and the platform was still again. For a moment Aitrus wondered if he had imagined it, but then it came again, stronger this time, almost audible.

Aitrus shrugged off his blanket and stood, then walked across until he stood close to the edge of the great drop. The whole shaft was vibrating, and now there was the faintest hum—a deep bass note—underlying everything.

For close on three months, the earth had been silent. Now, even as they prepared to leave it, it had awoken once again.

Aitrus turned, looking back to where the guildsmen were encampted beside the excavator, but they slept on, in a dead sleep after the feast. He alone was awake.

Hurrying across, he bent down beside Master Geran and gently shook him. At first the old man did not wake, but then his blind eyes flicked open.

“Aitrus?”

Aitrus did not know how the old man did it, but his senses were infallible.

“There’s movement,” he said quietly. “The shaft was vibrating like a great hollow pipe.”

Master Geran sat up, then turned to face the center of the tunnel. For a moment he was perfectly still, then he looked up at Aitrus again. “Help me up, boy.”

Aitrus leaned down, helping him up.

“How many times?” Geran asked as he shuffled over to the edge of the shaft.

“Three so far. That is, if the one that woke me was the first.”

Geran nodded, then dropped into a crouch, the fingertips of his right hand brushing gently against the surface of the platform.

For two, maybe three minutes they waited, Aitrus standing there at his side, and then it came again, stronger—much stronger—this time and more prolonged. When it had subsided, Geran stood and shook his head.

“It’s hard to tell the direction of it. The shaft channels its energy. But it was powerful, Aitrus. I wonder why I was not woken by it.”

Aitrus looked down, a faint smile on his lips, but said nothing. He had seen how much of the strong D’ni wine Master Geran had drunk. The only real surprise was that he had woken when Aitrus had shaken him.

“Should we wake the others, Master?” he asked. But Geran shook his head.

“No. We shall leave it for now. The final survey will show whether there is any risk. Personally I doubt it. We have come far to the north of the isopaches we identified earlier. If there is any volcanic activity, it is far from here. What we are hearing are merely echoes in the rock, Aitrus. Impressive, yes, but not harmful.”

Geran smiled, then patted his arm. “So get some sleep, eh, lad? Tomorrow will be a long day.”

§

Reassured by Master Geran, Aitrus settled back beneath his blanket and was soon asleep once more. If the ground shook, he did not notice it. Indeed, he was the last to wake, Master Telanis’s hand on his shoulder, shaking him, returning him from the dark stupor into which he seemed to have descended.

“Come, Aitrus. Wash now and get dressed. The ceremony is in half an hour!”

They lined up before the cutter, alongside men from the Guild of Maintainers, whose task it would be to oversee this final stage of the journey to the surface.

The Maintainers were one of the oldest guilds, and certainly one of the most important, their Grand Masters—alongside those of the Guild of Writers, the Miners, the Guild of Books and the Ink-Makers—becoming in time the Lords of D’ni, members of the Five. Yet this was a strange and perhaps unique task for them, for normally their job was to ensure that the D’ni Books were kept in order, the Ages correctly run, and that the long-established laws, laid down countless generations before, were carried out to the letter. They had little to do with excavations and the cutting of tunnels. Indeed, guildsmen from some of the more physical guilds—those who dealt constantly with earth and rock and stone—would, in the priacy of their own Guild Halls, speak quietly of them, in a derogatory fashion, as “cleanhanded fellows.” Yet these guildsmen had been specially trained for this purpose and had among their number guildsmen drafted in from the Guild of Miners, and from the Surveyors.

They now would carry out the final excavation, and if any surface dwellers were found, it would be the Maintainers who would first establish contact, for this was a most delicate matter and it was held that only the Maintainers could be vouchsafed to undertake that task properly.

Few of the Guild Masters who had been at the feast the day before had remained for this final little ceremony; yet in the small group who now stepped forward were no less than two of the Great Lords, Lord Tulla

and Lord Eneah. Standing just behind them, among a group of five Grand Masters, was Veovis.

Lord Tulla said a few words, then stepped forward, pulling down the lever that would set the great cutter in motion. As he did, Veovis looked across at Aitrus and gave the tiniest nod.

Were these, Aitrus wondered, the faction in the Council who were in favor of making contact with the surface-dwellers? Or was that a misreading of things? Had the rest, perhaps, simply been too busy to attend?

As Lord Tulla stepped back, the engines of the cutter thundered into life and the circular blade began to spin, slowly at first, then, as it nudged the rock, with increasing speed.

The simple ceremony was concluded. The great men turned away, ready to depart. At a signal from Master Telanis, the Surveyors fell out.

Aitrus could see that Veovis was busy, talking to the Grand Master of the Guild of Messengers. Content to wait, he watched the machine, remembering the noises in the night.

Master Geran had been up early, he had been told, making a new survey of the rock through which this final tunnel was to be dug. His soundings had shown nothing unusual, and the vibrations in the earth had ceased. Both Geran and Telanis were of the opinion that the quakes had not been serious, but were only the settlement of old faults. Aitrus himself had not been quite so sure, but had bowed to their experience.

“Aitrus?”

He turned, facing Veovis.

The young Lord smiled apologetically. “You must forgive me, Aitrus. Once again I must be elsewhere. But I shall return, this evening, after I have seen Lord Tulla off. I did not think he would stay for the ceremony, but he wished to be here.”

“I understand.”

“Good.” And without further word, Veovis turned and hurried across to where Lord Tulla was waiting.

Aitrus watched the party step into the special carriage that had been set up on a temporary rack down the wall of the shaft, then stepped up to the edge, following its progress down that great well until it was lost to sight.

It was strange. The more Veovis delayed their talk, the more uncomfortable Aitrus found himself at the thought of it. Veovis wanted to be his friend, it seemed. But why? It made little sense to him. Surely Veovis had friends enough of his own? And even if that were not so, why him? Why not someone more suited to his social role?

Perhaps it would all come clear. Yet he doubted it. The rock was predictable. It had its moods, yet it could be read, its actions foreseen. But who could say as much of a man?

Aitrus turned, looking back across the platform. Already the cutter was deep in the rock, like a weevil burrowing its way into a log. Crouching, he got out his notebook and, opening it, laid it on his knee, looking about him, his eyes taking in every detail of the scene.

This evening, he thought. Then, dismissing it from his mind, he began to sketch.

§

Aitrus was reaching up, his hands blindly feeling for the scales, when the shock wave struck. He was thrown forward, his forehead smacking against the bulkhead as the whole craft seemed to be picked up and rolled over onto its side.

For five long seconds the excavator shook, a great sound of rending and tearing filling the air.

And then silence. Struggling up, Aitrus put a hand to his brow and felt blood. Outside, on the platform, a siren was sounding. For a moment the lights in the craft flickered dimly, then the override switched in and the emergency lighting came on. In its sudden light, he could see that the excavator had been completely overturned. It lay now on its back.

Pulling himself hand by hand along the tilted corridor, he climbed out onto the side of the craft and looked about him.

Guildsmen were running about, shouting urgently to one another. On the far side of the platform a huge section of the metal grid had buckled and slipped from its supports and now hung dangerously over the shaft. Behind it a dark line snaked up the wall of the shaft.

Aitrus’s mouth fell open in surprise. The shaft was breached! The nara stone torn sheet from sheet!

The quake must have been directly beneath them.

Looking across, he saw that the mouth of the new tunnel was cracked. A large chunk of rock had fallen from the arch and now partly blocked the tunnel. The cutter, deep inside the tunnel, was trapped.

As he stood there, Master Telanis came over to him and, grasping his arm, turned Aitrus to face him.

“Aitrus! Get on protective gear at once, then report back to me. We must secure this area as soon as possible. If there’s another quake, the platform could collapse.”

Too shocked to speak, Aitrus nodded, then ducked back inside, making his way to the equipment room. In a minute he was back, two spare canisters of air and a breathing helmet lugged behind him. If the air supply to the shaft had been breached, breathing might soon become a problem, particularly if any of the great ventilation fans had been damaged.

Seeing him emerge, Telanis beckoned him across. Several of the guildsmen were already gathered about him, but of Master Geran there was no sign.

Calmly, the simple sound of his voice enough to steady the frayed nerves of the young men, Master Telanis organized them: sending some to bring power-drills, others to sort out protective clothing. Finally, he turned, looking to Aitrus.

“Master Geran has gone, Aitrus,” he said quietly. “He was standing near the edge when it hit. I saw him go over.”

The news came like a physical blow. Aitrus gave a tiny cry of pain.

“I know,” Telanis said, laying a comforting hand on his shoulder. “But we must look after the living now. We do not know the fate of the cutter’s crew yet. And there were Maintainers with them. If the tunnel came down on them we may have to try to dig them out.”

Aitrus nodded, but he was feeling numb now. Geran gone. It did not seem possible.

“What should I do?” he said, trying to keep himself from switching off.

“I have a special task for you, Aitrus. One that will require an immense amount of courage. I want you to go down and make contact with whoever is in the lower chamber. I want you to let them know how things are up here: that the shaft wall is cracked, the cutting team trapped. And if

they can send help, then I want it sent as soon as possible. You have that, Aitrus?”

“Master.”

But for a moment he simply stood there, frozen to the spot.

“Well, Aitrus?” Tenanis coaxed gently.

The words released him. Strapping one of the cylinders to his back, he pulled on the helmet, then hurried across to the head of the steps.

They were blocked. A great sheet of nara had fallen across the entrance. He would have to find another way down.

He went back to where the temporary track began. With the steps blocked, there was only one way down, and that was to climb down the track, hand over hand, until he reached the bottom.

For a moment he hesitated, then, swinging out over the gap, he grabbed hold of the metal maintenance ladder that ran between the broad rails of the track. Briefly his eye went to the metal clip at the neck of his uniform. If another big quake struck, he would have to clip himself to the ladder and pray it did not come away from the shaft wall.

And if it did?

Aitrus pushed the thought away and, concentrating on the task at hand, began the descent.

§

Aitrus was almost halfway down when the second quake struck.

Clipping himself to the metal strut, he locked both arms about the ladder, then dug his toes into the gap between the rung and the wall.

This time it went on and on, the whole shaft shaking like a giant organ pipe, things falling from the platform overhead.

The metal track beside him groaned and for a while he thought it was going to prize itself from the wall as the metal studs strained to come away from the rock—if he wasn’t shaken from the ladder first!

How long it was he could not tell, but it seemed a small eternity before, with an echoing fall, the shaking stopped.

The sudden silence was eerie. And then something clattered onto the marble far below.

Aitrus opened his eyes. Across from him the shaft wall gaped. Cracks were everywhere now. The great molded sections were untouched, yet there were huge gaps between them now, as if the tunnel wall behind them had slipped backward. The outer wall of the spiral steps had fallen away in many places, and several of the huge securing rivets had jiggled their way out of the rock.

The sight made his stomach fall away. It had all seemed so sound, so permanent, yet one more quake and the whole shaft could easily collapse in upon itself.

Unclipping himself, Aitrus resumed his descent, ignoring the aches in his calves and shoulders, pushing himself now, knowing that time was against him. But he had not gone far when he stopped dead.

There had been a shout, just below him.

He leaned out, trying to see where it had come from, and at once caught sight of the carriage.

Some forty, maybe fifty spans below him, the track bulged away from the shaft wall, pulled outward by the weight of the carriage.

As Aitrus stared, the shout came again. A cry for help.

“Hold on!” he shouted back. “Hold on; I’m coming!”

The floor of the shaft was still a good five hundred spans below, and looking at the way the track was pulled away from the wall, he knew he would have to climb along the track and over the top of the carriage if he was to help.

A length of rope would have come in handy, but he had none. All he had was a canister of air.

Making sure his grip on the ladder was good, Aitrus reached across and grabbed hold of the rail.

Just below where he had hold of it, the bolts that had pinned the track to the shaft wall had been pulled out. The question was: Would his extra weight bring a further length of track away from the wall and send the carriage tumbling down to the foot of the great shaft?

He would have to take a chance.

The outer edge of the track was grooved to match the teeth in the track that ran up one side of the carriage. The great guide wire that ran through the carriage had snapped, so that tooth-and-groove connection was all that prevented the carriage from falling. If *that* went…

There was the faintest rumble, deep in the earth. Things fell with a distant clatter onto the marbled floor below. The metal of the carriage groaned.

Now, he told himself. Now, before there's another quake.

Counting to five, he swung over onto the track, his fingers wrapped about the toothlike indentations in the rail, then he began to edge backward and down, his feet dangling over the abyss.

The track creaked and groaned but did not give. He moved his hands, sliding them slowly along the rail, left hand then right, his eyes all the while staring at the wall just above him, praying the bolts would hold. And then his toes brushed against the roof of the carriage.

He swallowed deeply, then found his voice again. "Are you all right?"

There was a moment's silence, then, in what was almost a whisper, "I'm badly hurt. I've stopped the bleeding, but…"

Aitrus blinked. That voice.

"Veovis?"

There was a groan.

It was Veovis. He was certain of it.

"Hold on," Aitrus said. "It won't be long now."

There was a hatch underneath the carriage. If he could climb beneath it and get into it that way, there was much less chance of him pulling the carriage off its guide track.

Yes, but how would he reach the hatch? And what if he could not free the lock?

No. This once he had to be direct. He would have to climb over the top of the carriage and lower himself in, praying that the track would bear the extra weight.

Slowly Aitrus lowered himself onto the roof, prepared at any moment for the whole thing to give.

He was breathing quickly now, the blood pounding in his ears. The straps from the cylinder were beginning to cut into his shoulders and for a moment he wondered if he should slip it off, together with the helmet, and let it fall, but it seemed too much effort. If he was going to die, the cylinder would make no difference. Besides, he was almost there now. He had only to slip his legs down over the edge of the roof and lower himself inside.

It was easier said than done. With his legs dangling out over the roof, he realized that he was just as likely to fall out into the shaft as he was to slip inside, into the relative safety of the carriage. Yet even as he thought it, he lost his grip and slipped. With a cry, he reached out and caught hold of the metal bar above the carriage door. His whole body was twisted violently about and then slammed against the side of the carriage.

The pain took his breath for a moment. For a full second his feet kicked out over the gap as he struggled on hold on. Then, with a grunt of effort, he swung himself inside.

The carriage creaked and groaned as it swung with him. There was the sound of bolts tearing from the wall. One by one they gave with a sharp pinging sound. With a sudden jolt the carriage dropped, throwing Aitrus from his feet, then, with another jolt, it held.

Aitrus lay on his back, the cylinder wedged under him. He felt bruised all over, but he was alive. Turning his head, he looked across the narrow floor of the carriage.

Veovis lay there, not an arm's length from him, his eyes closed, his breathing shallow. His flesh, which had seemed pale before, was now ash white, as if there were no life in him.

Moving slowly, carefully, Aitrus got himself up into a sitting position, then edged across to where Veovis lay.

Veovis looked badly hurt. There was a large bruise at his temple, and blood had seeped through the makeshift bandage he had wrapped about his upper arm, but that would have to wait. His breathing had become erratic. Even as Aitrus leaned over him to listen to his chest, Veovis's breath caught and stopped.

For a moment Aitrus wasn't sure. Then, knowing that every second counted, he reached behind him and pulled the cylinder up over his head, laying it down at Veovis's side before removing his helmet.

Precious seconds were wasted making sure the airflow was working properly; then, satisfied, he lifted Veovis's head and slipped the helmet on, before rolling him over onto his back.

The carriage swayed then settled.

Nothing was happening…

Aitrus blinked, then felt down at the wrist for a pulse. Veovis's heart had stopped.

Leaning over him, Aitrus pressed into his chest, leaned back, then pressed again. Veovis groaned, then sucked in air.

Aitrus sat back, knowing that he had done as much as he could. Veovis was in no condition to help himself, and on his own, Aitrus knew that he would not be able to lift the deadweight of Veovis out of the carriage and back down to the floor of the shaft.

There was a faint rumble. Again the carriage shook.

Slowly the rumbling grew, stronger and stronger until Aitrus was sure that the carriage would shake itself free from the restraining track. Slowly the light faded, as if a great shadow had formed about them. Then, with a sound of rending metal, the carriage was torn from the track.

It tilted sharply forward. Aitrus caught his breath, waiting for the fall, but the carriage had stopped in midair. Slowly, the walls on either side of him began to buckle inward.

“Noooo-oh!”

The buckling stopped. With a hiss of hydraulics the carriage jerked forward, then began slowly to descend with a strange jogging motion.

Aitrus began to laugh. Relief flooded him.

It was a cutter. A cutter had climbed the shaft walls and plucked them from the track. Now, holding them between its cutting arms, it was slowly carrying them down.

Aitrus leaned across, checking that Veovis was breathing steadily, then sat back, closing his eyes, his head resting against the buckled wall.

Safe.

§

The Council ordered the shaft repaired, the top tunnel completed, and then they sealed it. There was to be no breakthrough, no meeting with the surface-dwellers. That was decided within the first ten minutes of the meeting. Whether the quakes had happened or not, they would have decided thus. But there was the matter of D’ni pride, D’ni expertise to be addressed, hence the repairs, the drive toward completion.

It would not be said that they had failed. No. The D’ni did not fail. Once they had decided upon a course of action, they would carry it through. That was the D’ni way, and had been for a thousand generations.

In the future, perhaps, when circumstances differed, or the mood of the Council had changed, the tunnel might be unsealed, a form of contact established, but for now that was not to be.

And so the adventure ended. Yet life went on.

§

It was two weeks after the Council's decision, and Aitrus was sitting in the garden on K'veer, the island mansion owned by Lord Rakeri situated to the south of the great cavern of D'ni.

Rakeri's son, the young Lord Veovis, was lounging on a chair nearby, recuperating, his shoulder heavily bandaged, the bruising to his head still evident. The two young men had been talking, but were quiet now, thoughtful. Eventually, Aitrus looked up and shook his head.

"Your father's offer is kind, Veovis, and well meant, yet I cannot accept it. He says he feels a debt of gratitude to me for saving your life, yet I did only what any other man would have done. Besides, I wish to make my own way in the world. To win honor by my own endeavors."

Veovis smiled. "I understand that fully, Aitrus, and it does you credit. And if it helps make things easier, I, too, would have turned down my father's offer, though be sure you never tell him that."

Aitrus made to speak, but Veovus raised a hand.

"However," he went on, "*I* owe you a debt, whatever you may say about this mythical 'anyman' who might or might not have helped me. Whether that is so or not, you *did* help me. And for that I shall remain eternally grateful. Oh, I shall not embarrass you with gifts or offers of patronage, dear friend, but let me make it clear, if there is ever anything you want—*anything*—that is in my power to grant you, then come to me and I shall grant it. There, that is my last word on it! Now we are even. Now we can both relax and feel less awkward with each other, eh?"

Aitrus smiled. "You felt it, too?"

"Yes. Though I don't know which is harder, owing a life or being owed one."

"Then let us do as you say. Let us be friends without obligations."

"Yes," Veovis said, rising awkwardly from his chair to grasp both of Aitrus's hands in his own in the D'ni fashion. "Friends, eh?"

“Friends,” Aitrus agreed, smiling back at the young Lord, “until the last stone is dust.”

PART TWO: OF STONE AND DUST AND ASHES

Anna stood at the center of the strange circle of rock and dust and looked about her, her eyes half-lidded.

She was a tall, rather slender girl of eighteen years, and she wore her long auburn hair, which had been bleached almost blond by the sun, tied back in a plait at her neck. Like her father, she was dressed in a long black desert cloak, hemmed in red with a broad leather tool belt at the waist. On her back was a leather knapsack, on her feet stout leather boots.

Her father was to the left of her, slowly walking the circle’s edge, the wide-brimmed hat he wore to keep off the sun was pulled back, a look of puzzlement on his face.

They had discovered the circle the previous day, on the way back from a survey of a sector of the desert southwest of the dormant volcano.

“Well?” she asked, turning to him. “What is it?”

“I don’t know,” he answered, his voice husky. “Either someone spent an age *constructing* this, sorting and grading the stones by size then laying them out in perfect circles, or…”

“Or what?”

He shook his head. “Or someone shook the earth, like a giant sieve.” He laughed. “From *below*, I mean.”

“So what *did* cause it?”

“I don’t know,” he said again. “I really don’t. I’ve never seen anything like it in over fifty years of surveying, and I’ve seen a lot of strange things.”

She walked over to him, counting each step, then made a quick calculation in her head.

“It’s eighty paces in diameter, so that’s close on eight hundred square feet,” she said. “I’d say that’s much too big to have been made.”

“Unless you had a whole tribe working at it.”

“Yes, but it looks natural. It looks…well, I imagine that from above it would look like a giant drop of water had fallen from the sky.”

“Or that sieve of mine.” He narrowed his eyes and crouched a moment, studying the pattern of stones by his feet, then shook his head again. “Vibrations,” he said quietly. “Vibrations deep in the earth.”

“Volcanic?”

“No.” He looked up at his daughter. “No, this was no quake. Quakes crack stone, or shatter it, or deposit it. They don’t grade it and sort it.”

“You’re looking tired,” she said after a moment. “Do you want to rest a while?”

She did not usually comment on how he looked, yet there was an edge of concern in her voice. Of late he had tired easily. He seemed to have lost much of the vigor he had had of old.

He did not answer her. Not that she expected him to. He was never one for small talk.

Anna looked about her once more. “How long do you think it’s been here?”

“It’s sheltered here,” he said after a moment, his eyes taking in every detail of his surroundings. “There’s not much sand drift. But judging by what there is, I’d say it’s been here quite a while. Fifty years, perhaps?”

Anna nodded. Normally she would have taken samples, yet it was not the rocks themselves but the way they were laid out that was different here.

She went over to her father. “I think we should go back. We could come here tomorrow, early.”

He nodded. “Okay. Let’s do that. I could do with a long, cool soak.”

“And strawberries and cream, too, no doubt?”

“Yes, and a large glass of brandy to finish with!”

They both laughed.

“I’ll see what I can rustle up.”

§

The lodge had been named by her father in a moment of good humor, not after the hunting lodge in which he had spent his own childhood, back in Europe, but because it was lodged into a shelf between the rock wall and the shelf below. A narrow stone bridge—hand-cut by her father some fifteen years ago, when Anna was barely three—linked it to the rest of the rocky outcrop, traversing a broad chasm that in places was close to sixty feet deep.

The outer walls of the Lodge were also of hand-cut stone, their polished surfaces laid flush. A small, beautifully carved wooden door, set deep within the white stone at the end of the narrow bridge, opened onto a long, low-ceilinged room that had been hewn from the rock.

Four additional rooms led off from that long room: three to the right, which they used as living quarters, and another, their laboratory and workshop, to the left.

Following him inside, she helped him down onto the great sofa at the end of the room, then ducked under the narrow stone lintel into the galley-kitchen at the front.

A moment later she returned, a stone tumbler of cold water held out to him.

"No, Anna. That's too extravagant!"

"Drink it," she said insistently. "I'll make a special journey to the pool tonight."

He hesitated, then, with a frown of self-disapproval, slowly gulped it down.

Anna, watching him, saw suddenly how pained he was, how close to exhaustion, and wondered how long he had struggled on like this without saying anything to her.

"You'll rest tomorrow," she said, her voice brooking no argument. "I can continue with the survey on my own."

She could see he didn't like the idea; nonetheless, he nodded.

"And the report?"

"If the report's late, it's late," she said tetchily.

He turned his head, looking at her. "I gave my word."

"You're ill. He'll understand. People are ill."

"Yes, and people starve. It's a hard world, Anna."

"Maybe so. But we'll survive. And you *are* ill. Look at you. You need rest."

He sighed. “Okay. But a day. That’s all.”

“Good. Now let’s get you to your bed. I’ll wake you later for supper.”

§

It was dark when she heard him wake. She had been sitting there, watching the slow, inexorable movement of the stars through the tiny square of window.

Turning, she looked through to where he lay, a shadow among the shadows of the inner room.

“How are you feeling now?”

“A little better. Not so tired anyway.”

Anna stood, walked over to where the pitcher rested in its carved niche, beside the marble slab on which she prepared all their meals, and poured him a second tumbler of cold water. She had climbed down to the pool at the bottom of the chasm earlier, while he slept, and brought two pitchers back, strapped to her back, their tops stoppered to prevent them from leaking as she climbed the tricky rock face. It would last them several days if they were careful.

He sipped eagerly as she held the tumbler to his lips, then sank back onto his pallet bed.

“I was dreaming,” he said.

“Were you?”

“Of mother. I was thinking how much you’ve come to look like her.”

She did not answer him. Six years had passed, but still the subject was too raw in her memory to speak of.

“I was thinking I might stay here tomorrow,” she said, after a moment. “Finish those experiments you began last week.”

“Uhuh?”

“I thought…well, I thought I could be on hand then, if you needed me.”

“I’ll be okay. It’s only tiredness.”

“I know, but…”

“If you want to stay, stay.”

“And the experiments?”

“You know what you’re doing, Anna. You know almost as much as I do now.”

“Never,” she said, smiling across at him.

The silence stretched on. After a while she could hear his soft snoring fill the darkened room.

She moved back, into the kitchen. The moon had risen. She could see it low in the sky through the window.

Setting the tumbler down, Anna sat on the stone ledge of the window and looked out across the desert. What if it wasn’t simple tiredness? What if he was ill?

It was more than a hundred miles to Tadjinar. If her father *was* ill, there was no way they would make it there across the desert, even if she laid him on the cart. Not in the summer’s heat.

She would have to tend him here, using what they had.

Her head had fallen at the thought. She lifted it now. It was no good moping.

Flowers. She would paint him some flowers and place the canvas in the doorway so he would see them when he woke in the morning.

The idea of it galvanized her. She got up and went through to the workroom, lighting the oil lamp with her father’s tinderbox and setting it down on the stone tabletop on the far side of the room.

Then, humming softly to herself, she took her mother’s paintbox down from the shelf and, clearing a space for herself, began.

§

Anna?

“Yes, father?”

What do you see?

“I see…” Anna paused, the familiar litany broken momentarily as, shielding her eyes, she looked out over the dusty plain from the granite outcrop she stood upon. She had been up since before dawn, mapping the area, extending her father’s survey of this dry and forlorn land, but it was late morning now and the heat had become oppressive. She could feel it burning through the hood she wore.

She looked down, murmuring her answer. “I see stone and dust and ashes.”

It was how he had taught her. Question and answer, all day and every day; forcing her to look, to *focus* on what was in front of her. Yes, and to make those fine distinctions between things that were the basis of all knowledge. But today she found herself stretched thin. She did not *want* to focus.

Closing the notebook, she slipped the pencil back into its slot, then crouched, stowing the notebook and her father’s compass into her knapsack.

A whole week had passed, and still he had not risen from his bed. For several nights he had been delirious, and she had knelt beside him in the wavering lamplight, a bowl of precious water at her side as she bathed his brow.

The fever had eventually broken, but it had left them both exhausted. For a whole day she had slept and had woken full of hope, but her father seemed little better. The fever had come and gone, but it had left him hollowed, his face gaunt, his breathing ragged.

She had tried to feed him and look after him, but in truth there seemed little she could do but wait. And when waiting became too much for her, she had come out here, to try to do something useful. But her heart was not in it.

The Lodge was not far away, less than a mile, in fact, which was why she had chosen that location, but the walk back was tiring under the blazing desert sun. As she climbed up onto the ridge overlooking the Lodge, she found herself suddenly fearful. She had not meant to be gone so long. What if he had needed her? What if he had called out to her and she had not been there?

She hurried down the slope, that unreasonable fear growing in her, becoming almost a certainty as she ran across the narrow bridge and ducked inside into the cool darkness.

“Father?”

The pallet bed was empty. She stood in the low doorway, breathing heavily, sweat beading her brow and neck and trickling down her back. She turned, looking out through the window at the desert.

What if he’d gone out looking for her?

She hurried through, anxious now, then stopped, hearing a noise, off to her right.

"Father?"

As she entered the workroom, he looked around and smiled at her. He was sitting at the long workbench that ran the full length of the room, one of his big, leather-bound notebooks open in front of him.

"This is good, Anna," he said without preamble. "Amanjira will be pleased. The yields are high."

She did not answer. Her relief at seeing him up and well robbed her of words. For a moment she had thought the very worst.

He had the faintest smile on his lips now, as if he knew exactly what she was thinking. Anna wanted to go across to him and hug him, but she knew that was not his way. His love for her was distant, stern, like an eagle's love for its chicks. It was the only way they had survived out here without her mother.

"Anna?"

"Yes?"

"Thank you for the painting. How did you know?"

"Know what?"

"That those flowers were my favorites."

She smiled, but found she could not say the words aloud. *Because my mother told me.*

§

He continued to improve the next few days, doing a little more each day, until, a week after he'd got up from his bed, he came out from the workroom and handed Anna the finished report.

"There," he said. "Take that to Amanjira. It's not precisely what he asked for, but he'll welcome it all the same."

She stared at the document, then back at her father. "I can't."

"Why not?"

"You're not strong enough yet. The journey would exhaust you."

"Which is why I'm not going. You know the way. You can manage the cart on your own, can't you?"

Anna shook her head. She could, of course, but that wasn't what she meant. "I can't leave you. Not yet."

He smiled. "Of course you can. I can cook. And I don't need much water. Two pitchers should see me through until you return."

"But…"

"No buts, Anna. If Amanjira doesn't get that report, we don't get paid. And who'll pay the traders then? Besides, there are things we need in Tadjinar. I've made a list."

Anna stared at him a moment, seeing how determined he was in this. "When do you want me to go?"

"This evening, immediately after sundown. You should reach the old volcano before dawn. You could take shelter in the cleft there. Sleep until the evening."

It was what they always did, yet in reiterating it like this it almost seemed as if he were coming with her.

"Aren't you worried?"

"Of course I am," he answered. "But you're a tough one, Anna. I always said you were. Just don't let those merchants in Jaarnindu Market cheat you."

She smiled at that. They were always trying to cheat them.

"I'll fill the pitchers, then."

He nodded, and without another word returned inside.

"To Tadjinar, then," she said quietly, looking down at the report in her hands. "Let's hope Lord Amanjira is as welcoming as my father thinks he'll be."

§

Amanjira was in good humor. He beamed a great smile at Anna, gestured toward the low chair that rested against the wall on one side of the great room, then he returned to his desk and sat, opening her father's report.

As Amanjira leaned forward, his dark eyes poring over the various maps and diagrams, Anna took the chance to look about her. This was the first time she had been inside the great man's house. Usually her father came here while she stayed at the lodging house in the old town.

The room was luxuriously decorated in white, cream, reds, and pinks. Bright sunlight filled the room, flooding in through a big, glass-paneled door that opened out onto a balcony. There was a thick rug on the floor and silk tapestries on the wall. And on the wall behind Amanjira was a portrait of the Emperor, given to him by the Emperor himself.

Everything there spoke of immense wealth.

Anna looked back at the man himself. Like herself, Amanjira was a stranger in this land, a trader from the east who had settled many years ago. Now he was one of the most important men in the empire.

Amanjira's skin was as dark as night, so black it was almost blue, yet his features had a strangely Western cast; a well-fleshed softness that was very different from the hawkish look of these desert people.

As if a dove had flown into a nest of falcons.

But looks deceived sometimes. This dove had claws. Yes, and a wingspan that stretched from coast to coast of this dry and sandy land.

Amanjira made a tiny noise—a grunt of satisfaction—then looked across at her, nodding to himself.

"This is excellent. Your father has excelled himself, Anna."

She waited, wondering what he would say next; what he would give her for this information.

"I shall instruct the steward to pay you in full, Anna. And tell your father that, if his findings prove correct, I shall reward him with a bonus."

She lowered her head, surprised. So far as she knew, Amanjira had never offered them a bonus before.

"You are too kind, Lord Amanjira."

Anna heard him rise and come across to her. "If you wish," he said softly, "you may stay here tonight, Anna. Share a meal, perhaps, before you return home."

She forced herself to look up. His dark eyes were looking at her with a surprising gentleness.

"Forgive me," she said, "but I must get back. My father is not well."

It was not entirely the truth. She wanted to stay this once and explore the alleys of the old town, but duty had to come first.

"I understand," he said, moving back a little, as if sensitive to the sudden defensiveness in her attitude. "Is there anything I can do for him?

Potions perhaps? Or special foods? Sheep's brain is supposed to be especially nutritious."

Anna laughed at the thought of her father eating sheep's brain, then grew serious again, not wanting to hurt Amanjira's feelings. "I thank you for your concern, Lord Amanjira, and for your kind offer of help, but we have all we need."

Amanjira smiled, then gave a little bow. "So be it. But if you change your mind, do not hesitate to come to me, Anna. Lord Amanjira does not forget who his friends are."

Again the warmth of his sentiments surprised her. She smiled. "I shall tell him what the Lord Amanjira said."

"Good. Now hurry along, Anna. I am sure I have kept you far too long."

§

The journey home was uneventful. Making good time, Anna arrived at the Lodge just after dawn. She had been away, in all, seven days.

Leaving the cart in the deep shadow by the ridge, she climbed up onto the bridge and tiptoed across, meaning to surprise her father, but the Lodge was empty.

Anna turned to the doorway and stood there, looking out over the silent desert.

Where would he be? Where?

She knew at once. He would be at the circle.

Leaving the cart where it was, she headed east across the narrow valley, climbing the bare rock until she came out into the early sunlight. It made sense that he would go there at this hour, before the heat grew unbearable. If she knew him, he would be out there now, digging about, turning over rocks.

Her father's illness had driven the circle from her mind for a time, but coming back from Tadjinar, she had found herself intrigued by the problem.

It seemed almost supernatural. But neither she nor her father believed in things that could not be explained. *Everything* had a rational reason for its existence.

Coming up onto the ridge, Anna saw her father at once, in the sunlight on the far side of the circle, crouched down, examining something. The simple physical presence of him there reassured her. Until then she had not been sure, not *absolutely* sure, that he was all right.

For a time she stood there, watching him, noting how careful, how methodical he was, enjoying the sight of it enormously, as if it were a gift. Then, conscious of the sun slowly climbing the sky, she went down and joined him.

"Have you found anything?" she asked, standing beside him, careful not to cast her shadow over the place where he was looking.

He glanced up, the faintest smile on his lips. "Maybe. But not an answer."

It was so typical of him that she laughed.

"So how was Amanjira?" he said, straightening up and turning to face her. "Did he pay us?"

She nodded, then took the heavy leather pouch from inside her cloak and handed it to him. "He was pleased. He said there might be a bonus."

His smile was knowing. "I'm not surprised. I found silver for him."

"Silver!" He hadn't told her. And she, expecting nothing more than the usual detailed survey, had not even glanced at the report she had handed over to Amanjira. "Why didn't you say?"

"It isn't our business. Our business is to survey the rocks, not exploit them."

She nodded at the pouch, "We make our living from the rock."

"An honest day's pay for an honest day's work," he answered, and she knew he meant it. Her father did not believe in taking any more than he needed. "Enough to live" was what he always said, begrudging no one the benefit from what he did.

"So how are you?" she asked, noting how the color had returned to his face.

"Well," he answered, his eyes never leaving hers. "I've come out here every morning since you left."

She nodded, saying nothing.

"Come," he said suddenly, as if he had just remembered. "I have something I want to show you."

They went through the gap between two of the converging ridges, then climbed up over a shoulder of rock onto a kind of plateau, a smooth gray slab that tilted downward into the sand, like a fallen wall that has been half buried in a sandstorm.

Across from them another, larger ridge rose up out of the sand, its eroded contours picked out clearly by the sun. The whiteness of the rock and the blackness of its shadowed irregularities gave it the look of carved ivory.

"There," he said, pointing to one of the larger patches of darkness near the foot of the ridge.

"A cave?" she asked, intrigued.

"A tunnel."

"Where does it lead?"

"Come and see."

They went down, crossing the hot sand, then ducked inside the shadowed entrance to the tunnel. They stopped a moment, letting their eyes grow accustomed to the darkness after the brilliant sunlight outside, then turned, facing the tunnel. Anna waited as her father lit the lamp, then held it up.

"Oh!"

The tunnel ran smoothly into the rock for fifteen, twenty paces, but that was it. Beyond that it was blocked by rock fall.

Undaunted, her father walked toward it, the lamplight wavering before him. She followed, examining the walls as she went.

"It looks lavatic," she said.

"It is," he answered, stopping before the great fall of rock. "And I'd say it runs on deep into the earth. Or would, if this rock wasn't in the way."

Anna crouched and examined a small chunk of the rock. One side of it was smooth and glassy—the same material as the walls. "How recent was this fall?" she asked.

"I can only guess."

She looked up at him. "I don't follow you."

"When I found no answers here, I began to look a bit wider afield. And guess what I found?"

She shrugged.

“Signs of a quake, or at least of massive earth settlement, just a few miles north of here. Recent, I’d say, from the way the rock was disturbed. And that got me thinking. There was a major quake in this region thirty years back. Even Tadjinar was affected, though mildly. It might explain our circle.”

“You think so?”

“I’d say that the quake, the rockfall here, and the circle are all connected. How, exactly, I don’t yet know. But as I’ve always said to you, we don’t know everything. But we might extend our knowledge of the earth, *if* we can get to the bottom of this.”

She smiled. “And the surveys?”

He waved that away. “We can do the surveys. They’re no problem. But this…this is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, Anna! If we can find a reason for the phenomena, who knows what else will follow?”

“So what do you suggest?”

He gestured toward the fallen rock. “I suggest we find out what’s on the other side of that.”

§

After they had eaten, Anna unpacked the cart. She had bought him a gift in the Jaarnindu Market. As she watched him unwrap it, she thought of all the gifts he had bought her over the years, some practical—her first tiny rock hammer, when she was six—and some fanciful—the three yards of bright blue silk, decorated with yellow and red butterflies that he had brought back only last year.

He stared at the leather case a moment, then flicked the catch open and pushed the lid back.

“A chess set!” he exclaimed, a look of pure delight lighting his features. “How I’ve missed playing chess!” He looked to her. “How did you know?”

Anna looked down, abashed. “It was something you said. In your sleep.”

“When I was ill, you mean?”

She nodded.

He stared at the chessboard lovingly. The pieces—hand-carved wood, stained black and white—sat in their niches in two tiny wooden boxes.

It was not a luxury item by any means. The carving was crude and the staining basic, yet that did not matter. This, to him, was far finer than any object carved from silver.

“I shall begin to teach you,” he said, looking up at her. “Tonight. We’ll spend an hour each night, playing. You’ll soon get the hang of it!”

Anna smiled. It was just as she’d thought. Gifts, she recalled him saying, aren’t frivolous things, they’re very necessary. They’re demonstrations of love and affection, and their “excess” makes life more than mere drudgery. You can do without many things, Anna, but not gifts, however small and insignificant they might seem.

So it was. She understood it much better these days.

“So how are we to do it?”

He looked to her, understanding at once what she meant. Taking one of his stone hammers from the belt at his waist he held it up. “We use these.”

‘But it’ll take ages!”

“We have ages.”

“But…”

“No buts, Anna. You mustn’t be impatient. We’ll do a little at a time. That way there’ll be no accidents, all right?”

She smiled and gave a single nod. “All right.”

“Good. Now let me rest. I must be fresh if I’m to play chess with you tonight!”

§

In the days that followed, their lives fell into a new routine. An hour before dawn they would rise and go out to the tunnel, and spend an hour or two chipping away at the rockfall. Anna did most of this work, loathe to let her father exhaust himself so soon after his illness, while he continued his survey of the surrounding area. Then, as the sun began to climb the desert sky, they went back to the Lodge and, after a light meal, began work in the laboratory.

There were samples on the shelves from years back that they had not had time to properly analyze, and her father decided that, rather than set off on another of their expeditions, they would catch up on this work and send the results to Amanjira.

Late afternoon, they would break off and take a late rest, waking as the sun went down and the air grew slowly cooler.

They would eat a meal, then settle in the main room at the center of the Lodge to read or play chess.

Anna was not sure that she liked the game at first, but soon she found herself sharing her father's enthusiasm—if not his skill—and had to stop herself from playing too long into the night.

When finally he did retire, Anna stayed up an hour or so afterward, returning to the workroom to plan out the next stage of the survey.

No matter what her father claimed, she knew Amanjira would not be satisfied with the results of sample analyses for long. He paid her father to survey the desert, and it was those surveys he was interested in, not rock analysis—not unless those analyses could be transformed somehow into vast riches.

In the last year they had surveyed a large stretch of land to the southwest of the Lodge, three days' walk away in the very heart of the desert. To survive at all out there they needed to plan their expeditions well. They had to know exactly where they could find shelter and what they would need to take. All their food, water, and equipment had to be hauled out there on the cart, and as they were often out there eight or ten days, they had to make provision for sixteen full days.

It was not easy, but to be truthful, she would not have wanted any other life. Amanjira might not pay them their true worth, but neither she nor her father would have wanted any other job.

She loved the rock and its ways almost as much as she loved the desert. Some saw the rock as dead, inert, but she knew otherwise. It was as alive as any other thing. It was merely that its perception of time was slow.

On the eighth day, quite early, they made the breakthrough they had been hoping for. It was not much—barely an armhole in the great pile of rock—yet they could shine a light through to the other side and see that the tunnel ran on beyond the fall.

That sight encouraged them. They worked an extra hour before going back, side by side at the rock face, chipping away at it, wearing their

face masks to avoid getting splinters in their eyes.

"What do you think?" he said on the walk back. "Do you think we might make a hole big enough to squeeze through, then investigate the other side?"

Anna grinned. "Now who's impatient?"

"You think we should clear more of it, then?"

"I don't know," she answered, walking on. "I think we should think about it."

That afternoon, in the workshop, he talked about it constantly and, come the evening, rather than debate it further, she gave in.

"All right," she said, looking up from her side of the chessboard. "But only one of us goes through at a time. And we use a rope. We don't know what's on the other side. If there's more quake damage it might be dangerous."

"Agreed," he said, moving his Queen. "Check." Then, smiling up at her. "Checkmate, in fact."

§

It took them two more days to make the gap wide enough. It would be a squeeze, but to make it any bigger would have meant another week's work at the very least.

"We'll prepare things tonight," he said, holding his lamp up to the gap and staring through. "You won't need much."

Anna smiled at that "you." She had thought she might have to fight him over it. "So what am I looking for?"

He drew the lamp back and turned to face her. "Anything unusual. A volcanic funnel, perhaps. Vents. Any pyroclastic deposits."

"You still think this is part of a larger volcanic system?"

"Almost certainly. These vents and boreholes are only part of it. There would have been a great basin of lava—of magma—deep down in the earth. In fact, the deeper it was, the wider spread these surface manifestations will be. The super heated lava would have found all of the weakest routes through the rock, fault lines and the like. That's all this is, really."

"Like the roots of a tree?"

He nodded, smiling faintly at her. Anna had never seen a tree. Not a *proper* tree, anyway. Only the shallow-rooted palms of Tadjinar. Most of what she knew of the world had come out of books, or had been told to her. That was the worst of living here—the narrowness of it.

Walking back with her, he raised the subject, the two of them speaking, as they always did, with their heads down, not even glancing at each other.

"Anna?"

"Yes?"

"Do you regret living here?"

"Do you?"

"I chose it."

"And you think if I had a choice, I'd choose differently?"

"Sometimes."

"Then you're wrong. I love the desert."

"But you don't know anything else."

"I'd still want to be here."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm sure."

§

"Mind the rope, Anna. It's getting snagged."

Anna paused, edging slightly to one side, then tugged gently at the rope. It came free. She was halfway through the gap in the rockfall and finding it a tighter squeeze than she'd imagined. She had managed to shrug her shoulders through the narrow hole, but her hips were another matter altogether. Nor could she see anything properly. The tiny slivers of light that peeped through the narrow gaps between her and the wall served more to emphasize how stuck she was than help her.

She could always try and heave herself through, of course, but then she'd most likely tumble down onto the floor on the other side, and it was quite a drop. Besides, only her left arm was free; the other was still wedged between her and the wall.

"Turn yourself about, Anna. Until you're facing the ceiling. The channel's wider than it's tall."

“We should have waited another week,” she said, trying to do what he said.

“Maybe. But you’re almost there now. Try and edge back a little. Yes…that’s it.”

Slowly, very slowly, she wriggled her way back, until she could feel that her head and shoulders were out over the gap. Now she had to try and free her arm. She tried to bring it up, but there wasn’t room. She’d have to turn again.

“Hold my feet,” she said.

Anna felt his hands grip the ankles of her boots firmly.

“Good. I’m going to try to turn onto my front now. At the same time I’m going to try to free my right arm.”

“All right.”

It was difficult. It felt as if the rock was trying to crush her—to pop her bones—but slowly she managed to turn herself, until she was facing the floor.

Anna could not see anything. The darkness in front of her seemed absolute. Not that the darkness itself worried her; she simply did not want to fall onto anything sharp.

“All right,” she said, as she finally freed her arm. “Now lower me slowly.”

The rock seemed to come up to touch her hands. Above her, light slowly spilled into the tunnel.

“That’s it,” she said. “Slowly now.”

She began to take her own weight, reaching forward slightly with her hands.

“All right. You can let go now. I’m down.”

Anna felt his fingers relent, his hands move back, away from her ankles. There was a faint noise from him, a grunt.

She scrambled up, then turned, brushing herself down. “Are you okay?”

He made a small noise of assent. “Just winded a little. Just give me a moment to get my breath.”

Anna went to the hole and looked back through. The lamp was on the floor by his feet where he had left it. He himself was leaning against the wall, slumped slightly, one hand on his chest.

“Are you sure you’re all right?”

He nodded and looked up at her. “I’ll be okay. I didn’t realize how heavy you are, that’s all.”

“You’re sure?”

“Yes. Now get on. Tie the rope about your waist. I’ll pass you through the lamp.”

She stooped and picked up the rope, fastening it tightly about her waist. It was a thin, strong rope, and they had some five hundred feet of it. That should be plenty for this preliminary exploration. Satisfied, she turned and, leaning through the gap, took the lamp from him.

“This, too,” he said, handing her his protective hat.

She put the lamp down, then tried on the hat, expecting it to be too big for her, but it was a perfect fit. She fastened the leather strap under her chin, then turned, lifting the lamp so that he could see her.

“Good,” he said, his eyes shining in the lamplight. “I’ll give you an hour, then I’ll call you back. But keep your eyes open, Anna. And don’t take chances.”

“I won’t.”

“You’ve got the notebook?”

Anna patted her top pocket.

“All right. Then get going. It’s cold here.”

She smiled then turned, facing the darkness, the lamp held up before her.

§

The library overlooked the darkened lake, its long, latticed windows giving a distant view of D’ni, the city’s lamplit levels climbing the great wall of the cavern.

A fire had been lit in the great fireplace. In its flickering light four men could be seen, sitting in huge armchairs about the fire, their faces thrown into sharp contrasts of gold and black. They had eaten an hour ago; now, as it grew late, they talked.

“I don’t know how you can say that, Veovis. Not with any certainty, anyway. Where’s your proof?”

Veovis turned to face his friend, his wineglass cradled in both hands, the light from the fire winking at its ruby heart.

“But that’s just it, Fihar. I need no proof. The matter is axiomatic. You argue that those races we have knowledge of, on those Ages to which we have linked, behave morally. I agree. But they do so because we have made it our business to encourage them to do so. Their morality is not innate, but taught. And we, the D’ni, were the ones who taught it to them. So much we have known for *thousands* of years.”

Veovis turned slightly, looking to another of them. “You, Suahrnir. You are a Maintainer. Is it not so? Is it not one of your prime duties to encourage a stable and moral social framework among the natives of the worlds to which we link?”

Suahrnir was in his middle years and a senior member of his guild. He had already served as Keeper of the Prison Ages and was currently in charge of disposing of all failed or unstable Ages. He pondered Veovis’s words a moment, then shrugged.

“It is, yet even so I have some sympathy with Fihar’s view. We cannot say with certainty until we have seen for ourselves. That, surely, is the scientific method?”

“Nonsense!” Veovis said, leaning forward, his face suddenly animated. “Without D’ni influences and D’ni guidance, those Ages would, without a shred of doubt, be nasty little backwaters, peopled by savages! Have you not instances enough in your own experience, Suahrnir, of such backsliding? Do we not need to be constantly vigilant?”

“We do,” Suahrnir agreed.

“Imagine then, up there on the surface. If there *are* people living up there, then they have developed now for several thousand years without any moral guidance. They will, most certainly, be savages, little more than animals, subservient to their most basic needs. And we have seen, all of us on many Ages, how wild animals behave!”

Aitrus, who had been listening silently, now spoke up. “Unless, like the D’ni, they have an innate morality.”

Veovis smiled and turned to his friend. “I would say that the chances of that were exceeding small, wouldn’t you agree, Aitrus?”

“I…guess so.”

“There!” Veovis said, as if that capped it. “You know, it makes me shudder to think of it. A whole society governed by lust and violence!”

“And the threat of violence,” Fihar added, clearly half-convinced now by the argument.

“Exactly! And where, in such a society, would there be room for the development of true intelligence? No. The most we might expect from the surfacedwellers is a surly, grunting species, a pack of jackals who would as soon bay at the moon as hold a decent conversation!”

There was laughter at that.

“Then you think the Council should reaffirm their decision?” Aitrus asked, returning the conversation to the place where it had begun. “You believe we should have nothing to do with the surface-dwellers?”

“I do indeed,” Veovis said emphatically. “And to be honest with you, I would not have simply sealed the end of the tunnel, I would have destroyed the whole thing altogether!”

“I see.”

“Oh, Aitrus,” Veovis said, leaning toward him. “I realize what sentimental feelings you have toward that expedition, and I admire you for it, but the venture was a mistake. The Council were wrong even to consider it!”

Aitrus said nothing. He merely sipped his wine and stared into the fire.

“And now I’ve hurt your feelings.” Veovis stood. “Look, I apologize. It was, perhaps, insensitive of me.”

Aitrus looked up at him, smiling sadly. “No, Veovis. You spoke as you saw, and I admire you for that. Besides, I have come to feel that maybe you were right after all. Maybe it *was* a mistake.”

Veovis smiled back at him. “Then you will vote with me in Council this time?”

Aitrus shrugged. “Who knows?”

§

Less than a hundred paces down, the tunnel was blocked again, a second rockfall making it unpassable. Yet to the left of the fall, like a grinning dark mouth, was a crack in the tunnel wall, large enough for Anna to step into, if she wished.

Anna stood on the rim, her left hand holding the edge of the wall, and she leaned into it, the lamp held out.

The crack was deep. Its floor went down steeply into the dark, from which a faint, cold breeze emanated. She could hear the sound of water, muted and distant, far below, and something else—a kind of irregular knocking. A tap, tap, tap that was like the weak blow of a chisel against the rock.

Anna turned, looking back the way she had come, then, deciding that the slope was not *too* steep, she clipped the lamp to the top of her hard hat and stepped down, steadying herself against the walls with both hands and digging her heels in, so that she would not fall.

The crack was not as long as she'd imagined. After twenty paces it leveled out. For a moment she thought it was a dead end, for the rock seemed to fill the crack ahead of her, but just before that it twisted to the side again, almost at ninety degrees. As she turned that corner, she gave a little cry of surprise.

"It's a cavern!" she yelled, not know whether he could hear her or not. "A huge cavern!"

That tapping noise was close now and the sound of flowing water much stronger.

Stepping out onto the floor of the cavern, Anna turned, looking about her. The lamp illuminated only a small part of space, yet she could see, at the edge of the light, what looked like a tiny stream, its surface winking back at her.

Water. The most precious thing of all here in the desert. More precious than the silver her father had found for Amanjira.

Anna walked over to it, conscious of the rope trailing out behind her. The stream was crystal clear. She stooped down beside it, dipping her hand into the flow, then put her fingers to her lips.

Ice cold, it was, and pure. Much better than the water in the pool.

She grinned, looking forward to telling her father of her discovery, then she turned and looked up at the ceiling, twenty yards or so overhead.

There it was! The source of the tapping noise. It looked like a bright red hanging of some kind, marble smooth yet thin, the tip of it swollen like a drop of blood. And where it hung in the breeze it tap-tap-tapped against the roof of the cavern.

Anna frowned, then turned, looking for the source of the breeze. The cavern narrowed at its near end, becoming a kind of funnel. The

breeze seemed to come from there.

She sniffed the air, surprised by how fresh it was. Usually there was a stale, musty smell in these caverns. A smell of damp and stone. But this was different.

Unclipping the lamp again, she held it up, trying to make out what the red stuff was. It seemed to be trapped in the rock overhead, or to have squeezed through the rock and then congealed.

She took out her notebook; settling it on her knee, she began to write, noting down not merely what she could see but her first notions about the cavern. Such, she knew from experience, could prove important. One might notice something that one afterward overlooked, or simply forgot. It was best to jot down *everything*, even if most of it proved subsequently to be ill-founded.

Putting the notebook away, she took hold of the rope and pulled a length of it toward her, making sure it was not snagged in the crack. It came easily. Reassured, she walked on, toward the near end of the cavern, toward the "funnel," glancing from side to side, keen not to miss anything.

Thirty paces from it, she stopped, the slight sense of wrongness she had felt earlier now welling up in her.

There, facing her, filling the whole of one end of the narrowed cavern, was a huge sheet of the red stuff. It looked like a thick, stiff curtain, except that it jutted from the rock like a lava flow.

But it wasn't lava. Not of any kind she knew, anyway.

It made her think of the circle on the surface. Somehow these two things were connected, but just how she didn't know.

She could not wait to tell her father of it.

Anna walked over and stood before it, lifting the lamp. It was blood red, but within that redness was a faint vein of black, like tiny wormthreads.

Perhaps it *was* a kind of lava.

Clipping the lamp to her hat again, she took one of the hammers from her belt and, kneeling beside the wall, tried to chip a small chunk of the stuff away.

After a moment she looked up, puzzled. The hammer had made no impression. The stuff looked soft and felt soft. It *gave* before the hammer. But it would not chip. Why, it wouldn't even mark!

Not lava, then. But what precisely *was* it? Unless she could get a piece for analysis, there was no way of telling.

Anna stood back a couple of paces, studying the wall, trying to see if there might not, perhaps, be a small piece jutting from the rest that would prove more amendable to the hammer, but the stuff formed a smooth unvarying surface.

She turned, looking about her, then laughed. There, only a few paces from her, lay a line of tiny red beads, like fresh blood spots on the gray rock floor. She looked up, seeing how the red stuff formed a narrow vein overhead, as if, under great pressure, it had been squeezed between the lips of the rock.

And dripped.

Anna crouched and, chipping this time into the rock *beneath* the red stuff, managed to free four samples of it, the largest of them the size of her fist.

As she went to slip the last of them into her knapsack, she turned it beneath the light, then squeezed it in her hand. It was almost spongy, yet it was tougher than marble. Not only that, but it seemed to hold the light rather than reflect it.

It was time to get back. They would need to analyze this before they investigated any further.

Anna slipped the sack onto her shoulder, then, taking the rope in her right hand, began to cross the cavern again, coiling it slowly as she headed for the crack.

§

The others were gone. Only Veovis and Aitrus remained. They stood in the broad hallway of the Mansion, beneath the stairs, the great stone steps and the tiny harbor beyond visible through the glass of the massive front door.

“Stay the night, Aitrus. You can travel back with me in the morning. The meeting does not start until midday.”

“I would, but there are some people I must see first thing.”

“Put them off. Tell them you have to prepare for the meeting. They’ll understand. Besides, I’d really like to talk to you some more.”

“I, too. But I must not break my word.”

Veovis smiled. “I understand. Your word means much to you, and rightly so. But try and come to me before the meeting. I shall be in my office in the Guild Hall. I would fain speak with you again before you cast your vote.”

Aitrus smiled. “I have decided already, old friend. I shall abstain.”

“Abstain?”

“I feel it would be for the best. I am not convinced by either argument. It may be as you say, and that my hesitancy is only sentiment, yet I still feel as if I would be betraying Master Telanis should I vote *against* the motion.”

“Then so be it. Take care, dear friend.”

The two men clasped each other’s hands.

“Until tomorrow.”

“Until tomorrow,” Aitrus echoed, smiling broadly. “And thank you. The evening was a most pleasant one.”

“As ever. Now go. Before I’m angry with you.”

§

“I’ve no idea,” he said, lifting his eye from the microscope.

“I’ve never seen anything like it. It looks…*artificial*.”

“Impossible,” Anna said, stepping up beside him and putting her own eye to the lens.

“So tell me what it is, then. Have you ever seen stone with that kind of structure before? There’s not a crystal in it! That wasn’t formed. At least, not by any *natural* process. That was *made!”*

She shrugged. “Maybe there are processes we don’t know about.”

“And maybe I know nothing about rock!”

Anna looked up and smiled. “Maybe.”

“Well?” he said, after a moment. “Don’t you agree?”

“I don’t see how you could make something like this. The temperatures and pressures you’d need would be phenomenal. Besides, what would the stuff be doing down there, in the cavern? It makes no sense.”

“No…”

She saw the doubt creep back into his face. He looked tired again. They had been working at this puzzle now for close on ten hours.

"You should rest now," she said. "We'll carry on with this in the morning."

"Yes," he said, but it was clear his mind was still on the problem. "It has to be obvious," he said, after a moment. "Something we've completely overlooked."

But what *could* they have overlooked? They had been as thorough with their tests as anyone could be. Had they had twice the equipment and ten times the opportunity to study it, they would still have come up with the same results. This stuff was strange.

§

He had been cheerful that night, more cheerful than he'd been in quite some time. He had laughed and joked. And in the morning he was dead.

She had woken, remembering the dream she'd had of flowers. Blue flowers, like those she had painted for him. Getting up, she had gone through into the galley kitchen and set out their bowls and tumblers, staring out of the window briefly, conscious of how different everything looked in the dawn light. It was only then that she found him, slumped on the floor beside the workroom bench. She knew at once that he was dead, yet it was only when she actually physically touched him that it registered on her.

His flesh was cold, like stone.

For a moment she could not turn him over. For a moment there was a blankness, a total blankness in her mind. Then she blinked and looked down at him again, where he lay.

He must have come here in the night. Unheard by her. And here he had died, silently, without a word to her.

She groaned and closed her eyes, grief overwhelming her.

§

The front lobby of the great guild hall was in turmoil. Aitrus, arriving late, looked about him, then, seeing Veovis to one side of the crowd of senior guildsmen, hurried over to him.

"Veovis. What's happening?"

"It is Lord Eneah. He was taken ill in the night."

Lord Eneah was Lord Tulla's replacement as head of the Council. Without his presence, or the appointment of a Deputy, the business of the Council could not be carried out.

"Then there will be no vote today."

"Nor for a week or two if the rumors are correct. It seems the Great Lord is at death's door."

"Ill tidings, indeed," said Aitrus.

While none of the D'ni elders could be considered jovial in any way that the young could recognize, Lord Eneah had maintained a sense of humor well into his third century and was wont to control the Council by means of wit rather than chastisement. If he were to die, the Council would indeed lose one of their finest servants.

"What are we to do?" Aitrus asked, looking about him at the crowded vestibule.

"Disperse, eventually," Veovis answered, "but not until our business here is done. Now, if you would excuse me, Aitrus, I would like to take the chance to talk to one or two waverers."

Aitrus nodded, letting Veovis go. Unlike Veovis, he had no strong political ambitions, and though he had been appointed to the Council young—as the junior representative of his Guild—it was not because he had pushed for that appointment.

He had moved swiftly through the ranks, becoming a Master in his thirty-eighth year—the youngest in almost seven centuries—and then, three years ago, he had found himself elected to the Council by his fellow guildsmen; an unexpected honor, for there were men almost twice his age, which was fifty five, who had been put up as candidates against him.

And so here he was, at the very center of things. And though his word meant little yet, and his vote was but a tiny weight on the great scales of D'ni government, he was not entirely without influence, for he was a friend of Lord Veovis.

Watching Veovis from across the pillared hallway, seeing how easily the young Lord moved among his peers, how relaxed he was dealing with the high and mighty of D'ni society, Aitrus found it strange how close they had grown since their reunion thirty years ago. If you had asked him then who might have been his closest friend and confidant in later years, he might have chosen anyone but Lord Rakeri's son, but so it was. In the public's eyes they were inseparable.

Inseparable, perhaps, yet very different in their natures. And maybe that was why it worked so well, for both had a perfect understanding of who the other was.

Had they been enemies, then there would have been no late-night debates, no agreements to differ, no grudging concessions between them, no final meeting of minds, and that would, in time, have been a tragedy for the Council, for many now recognized that in the persons of Veovis and Aitrus were the seeds of D'ni's future.

Their friendship had thus proved a good omen, not merely for them but for the great D'ni State.

"Aitrus? How are you? How is your father these days?"

Aitrus turned to greet his interrogator, smiling at the old man, surprised—ever surprised—to find himself in such high company.

"He is well, Grand Master Yena. Very well, thank you."

§

All was done. The cart was packed, her last farewells made. Anna stood on the far side of the bridge, tearful now that the moment had come, looking back into the empty Lodge.

This had been her home, her universe. She had been born here and learned her lessons in these rooms. Here she had been loved by the best two parents any child could have wished for. And now they were gone.

What remained was stone. Stone and dust and ashes.

Those ashes—her father's—were in a tiny sealed pot she had stowed carefully on the cart, beside another that held her mother's ashes.

She turned away, knowing she could not remain. Her future lay elsewhere. Tadjinar, perhaps, or maybe back in Europe. But not here. Not now that he was dead.

Her heart felt heavy, but that, too, she knew, would pass. Not totally, for there would be moments when she would remember and then the hurt would return, yet the grief she now felt would lessen. In time.

She clambered down. The cart was heavy and Tadjinar was far, yet as she leaned forward, taking the strain, beginning to pull it up the shallow slope, the harness ropes biting into the leather pads on her shoulders, she recalled her father's words:

A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.

That much remained of him, at least. The memories, the words, and the great wisdom of the man.

She wiped the wetness from her cheeks and smiled. He was in there now, in her head, until she, too, was dust or ashes.

What do you see, Anna?

As she climbed the narrow slope that led out of the valley, she answered him, her voice clear in the desert's stillness.

"I see the endless desert, and before me the desert moon, rising in the last light of the dusk. And I see you there, everywhere I look. I see *you* there."

§

The way to Tadjinar did not take her past the circle, yet she felt compelled to see it. If her future path lay elsewhere, she would at least take the memory of it with her.

Leaving the cart hidden in a narrow gully, she set off across the sand toward the circle, the full moon lighting her way. In the moonlight it seemed more inexplicable than ever. What on earth could have caused it?

Or what *in* earth.

Anna crouched at the center of the circle, thinking of what her father had said that first time. It was indeed as if the earth beneath had been not just shaken but *vibrated.* And what could do that? Sound was pure vibration, but what sound—what mighty echo in the rock—could possibly account for this?

Perhaps the answer was in the cavern. Perhaps it was there and she had simply not seen it.

It was madness even to think of exploring again, especially alone, yet the thought of walking away, of never having tried to find an answer, was impossible. She had to go and look.

In the knapsack on her back she had all she needed. In it were her father's hard hat, his lamp and tinderbox, the rope. As if she'd known.

Anna smiled. Of course she'd known. It was compulsion. The same compulsion to know that had driven her father all his life.

And if you find nothing, Anna?

Then she would know she had found nothing. And she would go to Tadjinar, and wherever else afterward, and leave this mystery behind her.

The tunnel was dark—a black mouth in the silvered face of the ridge. The very look of it was daunting. But she was not afraid. What was there to fear, after all?

Anna lit the lamp then walked into the tunnel. The rock fall was where they had left it, and the gap.

She studied it a moment, then nodded to herself. She would have to douse the lamp then push the knapsack through in front of her. It would not be easy in the dark, but she had done it once before.

Taking the hard hat from the sack, she pulled it on, tying the straps securely about her chin, then snuffed the lamp. The sudden darkness was intense. Stowing the lamp safely at the bottom of the sack, she pulled the drawstrings tight, then pushed it through the gap, hearing it fall with a muffled clatter.

Remembering how difficult it had been, this time she went into the gap face down, her arms out before her. Her problem last time was that she had misjudged how wide the gap was. With her arms outstretched it was much easier. The only problem now was lowering herself on the other side.

Emerging from the gap, she let her hands feel their way down the irregular surface of the rock face, her feet hooked about he edges of the gap. Then, when she was confident that the drop was not too great, she pulled herself forward, letting her legs slide into the gap, her head tucked in to her shoulders as she rolled.

In the dark, the drop seemed a lot farther than she remembered it. There was a moment's inner panic, and then she hit the floor hard, the impact jolting her badly.

She lay there a moment, the knapsack wedged uncomfortably in her lower back. Her wrists ached from the impact and the back of her head

and neck felt bruised, but there seemed to be no serious damage.

Anna sat up, reaching behind her for the bag, then winced as a sudden pain ran up the length of her left arm from the wrist to the elbow. She drew the arm back, then slowly rotated the wrist, flexing her fingers as she did so.

“Stupid,” she said, admonishing herself. “That was a very stupid thing to do.”

Yes, but she had got away with it.

Only just, a silent voice reminded her.

She turned herself around, organizing herself, taking the lamp from the knapsack and lighting it.

In its sudden glow, she looked back at the blockage and saw just how far she had fallen. It was four, almost five feet in all. She could easily have broken her wrists.

She had been lucky.

Clipping the lamp onto the hat, Anna slung the bag over her shoulder then eased herself up into a standing position.

She would have one good look around the cavern, and that was it.

And if she found something?

Anna turned, facing the darkness of the borehole, noticing the faint breeze in the tunnel for the first time.

She would decide that if and when. But first she had to look.

§

To the left of the wedge, on the shoulder of that great flattened mass of redness that protruded from the ordinary rock, was a gap. Eight feet wide and two high, it was like a scowling mouth, hidden from below by the thick, smooth lip of the strange material.

Anna had found it late in her search, after scouring every inch of the cavern, looking for something that clearly wasn’t there. Only this—this *made* lavatic rock—was different. Everything else was exactly as one would have expected in such a cave.

Unclipping the lamp from her hat, she leaned into that scowling mouth, holding it out before her. Inside, revealed by the glowing lamp, was a larger space—a tiny cave within a cave—its floor made entirely of

the red material, its ceiling of polished black rock, like the rock in the volcanic borehole. Seeing that, she understood. Whatever it was, it had once been in a molten state, like lava, and had *flowed* into this space, plugging it. Or almost so.

She squeezed through, crawling on her hands and knees, then stood. The ceiling formed a bell above her. She was in a pocket within the rock.

It was like being inside the stomach of some strange animal.

At the far end, the ceiling dipped again, yet did not entirely meet the floor. There was another gap.

Anna walked across, then crouched, holding out the lamp.

The gap extended into the rock, ending some ten yards back in a solid wall of the red material.

Yet there was a breeze, a definite breeze, coming from the gap. She sniffed. It was air. Pure, unscented air.

It had to lead up again, to the surface. Yet that didn't quite make sense, for this did not smell like desert air. She knew the smell of the desert. It left a scorched, dry taste in the mouth. This air was moist, almost sweet in its lack of minerals.

And there was something else. The light was wrong.

Dimming the lamp almost until it guttered, she set it down behind her, then looked back. Despite the sudden darkness, the wall in front of her still glowed. That glow was faint and strangely dim, as if the light itself was somehow *dark*, yet she was not mistaken.

There was light somewhere up ahead.

Picking up the lamp again, Anna raised the wick until the glow was bright. Then, getting down on her hands and knees, she crawled into the gap, pushing the lamp before her. Sure enough, the red stuff filled the tunnel's end, yet just before it, to the left, another crack opened up. She edged into it, following its curving course about the swollen wall of red to her right. That curve ended abruptly, yet the crack continued, veering off at ninety degrees to her left. She followed it.

The breeze was suddenly stronger, the scent of sweet, fresh air overpowering. And there was a noise now, like the hiss of escaping gas.

The crack opened up, like the bell of a flower. To her right the red wall seemed to melt away. Ahead of her was a cave of some sort.

No, not a cave, for the floor was flat, the walls regular.

She climbed up, onto her feet, then held the lamp up high, gasping with astonishment at the sight that met her eyes.

§

Alone in his rooms, Aitrus pulled off his boots, then sat down heavily in his chair. It was a typical guild apartment, like all of those given to unmarried Masters. Sparsely furnished, the walls were of bare, unpolished stone, covered here and there with guild tapestries; thick woven things that showed machines embedded in the rock. Broad shelves in alcoves covered three of the four walls, Aitrus's textbooks—specialist Guild works on rock mechanics, cohesion, tacheometry, elastic limit, shear strength and permeability, as well as endless works on volcanology—filling those shelves.

There were a few volumes of stories, too, including an illustrated volume of the ancient D'ni tales. This latter lay now on the small table at Aitrus's side, where he had left it the previous evening. He picked it up now and stared at the embossed leather cover a moment, then set it down.

He was in no mood for tales. What he wanted was company, and not the usual company, but something to lift his spirits. *Someone*, perhaps.

It seemed not a lot to ask for, yet some days he felt it was impossible.

Aitrus sighed then stood, feeling restless.

Maybe he should take a few days off to visit his family's Age. It was some while since he had been there and he needed a break. It would be several days at least before the Council met again and his work was up straight. No one would blame him for taking a small vacation.

He smiled. Pulling on his boots again, he went over to the door and summoned one of the house stewards. While the man waited, he scribbled a note, then, folding it, handed it to him.

"Give this to Master Telanis."

The steward bowed, then turned and disappeared along the corridor.

Aitrus turned, looking back into the room, then, without further ado, pulled the door closed behind him.

§

The cavern, which had at first glance seemed small, was in fact massive. What Anna had first taken as the whole of it was in fact only a kind of antechamber. Beyond it was a second, larger chamber whose walls glowed with a faint, green light.

And in that chamber, dominating its echoing central spaces, rested two massive machines, their dark, imposing shapes threatening in the half-dark. Like sentinels they stood, their huge limbs raised as if in challenge.

Indeed, it had been a moment or two before she had recognized them for what they were. Her first irrational thought had been that they were insects of some kind, for they had that hard, shiny, carapaced look about them. But no insect had ever grown *that* large, not even under the blazing desert sun. Besides, these insects had no eyes; they had windows.

Anna walked toward them, awed not merely by their size but by the look of them. She had seen steam-driven machines in her father's books—massive things of metal plate, bolted together with huge metal studs—but these were very different. These had a smooth, sophisticated look that was quite alien to anything she had ever seen before. These were sleek and streamlined, the way animals and insects were, as if long generations of trial and error had gone into their design.

There were long flanges running along the sides of the nearest craft and studded oval indentations. Long gashes in its underside—vents of some kind?—gave it a strange, almost predatory air.

The closer she got to them, the more in awe she felt, for it was only this close that she came to realize the scale on which their makers must have worked. The dark flank of the nearest machine, to her left, rose up at least five times her height. While the second, tucked back a little, was bigger yet.

She also saw now just how different the two were. As if each had a separate purpose. The nearest was the simpler of the two, its four great limbs ending in cone-shaped vents. The other was much more sinister and crablike, its segmented body heavily armored.

Standing beneath the first of them, she reached out and touched its dark, mirror-smooth surface. It was cool, rather than cold. Unexpectedly

her fingers did not slip lightly over its surface, but caught, as if they brushed against some far rougher, more abrasive material.

Anna frowned and held the lamp close. Instead of reflecting back her image, the strange material seemed to hold the light, to draw it into its burnished green-black depths.

Out of the corner of her eye she noted something, down low near the floor of the right-hand machine. She crouched, reaching out to trace the embossed symbol with her finger.

Symbol, or letter? Or was it merely decoration?

Whichever, it was not like any written language she had ever seen.

Taking the notebook from her sack, she quickly sketched it, placing the finished sketch beside the original.

Yes. Just so.

She slipped the notebook away, then lifted the lamp, turning slowly to look about her. As she did, she tried to place the pieces of the puzzle together.

What did she have so far? The circle of rock and dust. The strange red “sealing” material. This other, green-black stone, which gave off a dim but definite light. And now these machines.

Nothing. Or, at least, nothing that made sense. Were these the remains of an ancient race that had once inhabited these parts? If so, then why had nothing else been unearthed? So great a race as this would surely have left many more traces of its existence. And why, if these were long-lost relics, did they look so new?

She stared up the huge, smooth flank of the machine toward what seemed to be a control room of some kind. There was a long, slit window up there, certainly, the upper surface of that window flush with the roof of the craft, the lower part of it forming part of the craft’s nose.

The rope was in her pack. If she could throw it up over the top of the machine and secure it on the other side, perhaps she could climb up there and look inside?

Anna slipped off her pack and took out the rope. Walking around to the front of the machine, she crouched down, holding the lamp out as she studied the chassis. Some ten, fifteen feet in, there were several small teatlike protuberances just beneath what looked like an exhaust vent. She would tie the rope to one of those.

She walked back, slowly uncoiling the rope in one hand. She really needed a weight of some kind to tie about the end of it, but the only suitable objects she had were the lamp and the tinderbox, and both were much too valuable to risk breaking.

Her first throw merely glanced against the side of the machine and fell back to the floor. Her second was better but had the same result.

Taking the end of the rope she knotted it time and time again, until there was a palm-sized fist of rope at the end of it. Satisfied, she tried again.

This time the rope sailed over the machine, the lightweight cord whistling through the air as it fell to the other side.

Laying her pack on the remaining coil, Anna walked around and collected the other end of it, then got down and crawled under the machine, winding the rope around and around one of the small protuberances until the thick end of it was wedged tightly against the machine.

Edging back, she stood, then tested the rope, tugging at it hard, leaning her full weight back on her heels. It held.

So far, so good. But the most difficult part was next, for the rope was far from secure. If it were to slip to the side as she was climbing, she could easily find herself in trouble.

Pulling the rope taught, she placed one booted foot against the hull of the craft and leaned back, taking the strain, feeling the sudden tension in the muscles of her calves and upper arms.

She began, leaning slightly to her right as she climbed, away from the front of the strange craft, keeping the rope taut at all times, ready at any moment to let go and drop back to the floor if it were to start slipping. But the rope held, almost as if it were glued in place. Perhaps some quality of the material, that abrasiveness she had noticed, helped, but as she continued to climb her confidence grew.

As she came up onto the broad back of the craft, she relaxed. The top of the great slit window was just in front of her now, some ten or twelve feet distant. Beyond it the nose of the craft tapered slightly, then curved steeply to the floor.

Getting down onto her hands and knees, Anna crawled slowly toward the front of the craft, until the edge of the window was just in front

of her. Leaning forward carefully, she looked down, through the thick, translucent plate, into the cabin of the craft.

In the oddly muted light from the oil lamp, the cabin seemed strangely eerie, the wavering shadows threatening.

She frowned, trying to understand exactly what she was looking at. There were two seats—or, at least, they looked like seats; tubular, skeletal things with a kind of netting for the seats—and there was a control panel of some kind just in front of that, but she could make neither head nor tail of the controls, if controls they were.

The panel itself was black. There were indentations in that blackness, and more of the strange symbols, but nothing in the way of levers or buttons, unless such things were hidden.

Anna eased forward a little, trying to see into the back of the cabin, but there was only a bulkhead there, not even a door. Whoever, or whatever, had operated this must have entered the cabin through this window.

That sudden thought, that the makers of this machine might have been other than human—might have been strange, alien creatures of the rock—sent a tiny ripple of fear through her. Until that moment her awe at her discovery had kept her from thinking what these machines might mean. But now her mind embraced that thought.

What if those strange webbing seats were designed not for two, but for a single creature: one huge, grotesque being, multilimbed and clawed, like the machines it made?

No, she told herself. *Whoever made this is long dead and gone. It only looks new*. But that moment of fear, of vivid imagining, had left its shadow on her.

She edged back slowly, then, taking hold of the rope again, climbed down.

Retrieving the rope, Anna stowed it away, then turned to face the second machine. If the function of the first machine was masked from her, this one was self-evident. The great drills at the end of each huge, jointed limb gave it away. This was a cutter.

Anna walked over, stopping just in front of it.

A question nagged at her. Why would someone go to such trouble to cut tunnels in the earth and then seal them? Had they found something down there?

Or was it a tomb?

The thought of a tomb—a royal tomb, surely, for why else go to all this bother?—excited her. Maybe she had stumbled onto the burial vault of some great ancient emperor. If so, then who knew what was down here? If they could build machines like these, then what riches—what curiosities—might lay buried with him?

She walked slowly to the right, circling the machine, her eyes going up, searching its massive flanks, taking in every aspect of its brutal yet elegant form. It had the look of a living thing: of something that had been bred in the depths of the rock. Here and there the material of which it was made seemed folded in upon itself, like the wing-casing of an insect. Yet if it had been based on any insect that existed, it was of a strange, muscular, hydraulic kind. And there were blisters—large swellings on the hull, two or three feet in length—that had no apparent purpose.

Anna stopped. Just beyond the machine, low in the great wall of the chamber, was a hole: a perfect circle of blackness in the green-black material of the wall. She walked another few paces. Just beyond the first hole was another, and a third. Tunnels. Undoubtedly tunnels.

But leading where?

Her heart pounding, she went over to the first of them. It was a small tunnel, barely large enough to walk within, but made, not natural. The same green-black stone lined the walls. It went down, into darkness.

The second tunnel was the same. The third, to her surprise, was not a tunnel at all, but a storeroom of some kind. Broad, empty shelves lined both sides of that excavated space.

Anna stepped out then looked across.

So which was it to be? The first tunnel or the second?

Neither, she decided. Or not now, anyway. Not without first preparing for the journey. That was the proper way of going about things: the way her father had taught her.

But that would mean squeezing through the tiny gap in the rock fall once again, then walking across the desert to where the cart was hidden. That last part alone was a two-hour journey, which was fine in the moonlight, but would be an ordeal under the desert sun.

And for what? She wasn’t going to go that far in. She only wanted to see if they led anywhere.

Five hundred paces. That was all she would allow herself. And if it did not look to be leading anywhere, she would come straight back.

Okay. But which?

Without making a conscious decision, her feet led her into the right-hand tunnel.

One, two three, she counted, her left hand steadying her against the wall as she began the steady descent. *Seven, eight, nine.*

Five hundred. It wasn't far.

Ahead of her the darkness stretched away, running deep into the rock, forever just beyond the bright reach of her lamp.

Eighty-two, eighty-three, eighty-four…

§

Having traveled much farther than her planned five hundred paces, Anna found that she was lost. She did not want to admit it to herself, but she was lost. After that last left-hand turn she had doubled back, but she had come out in a place she hadn't been before. Or, at least, she couldn't remember having been there. It was a kind of cavern, only it was small and perfectly spherical.

She had lost count an hour ago. Two hours, maybe. Who knew down here? All she knew was that the map she had been following in her head had let her down. She had made one wrong turn and everything had seemed to slip away.

It was a labyrinth—a perfect maze of interlinked tunnels, all of which looked the same and seemed to lead…nowhere.

A tomb. It had to be a tomb. And this was part of it, this maze in which she was now inextricably lost.

She would die down here, she was certain of it now.

The thought made her stop and put her hand out to steady herself. Her head was pounding.

Think, Anna. Think what you're doing.

Anna looked up. The voice was clear in her head, almost as if he had spoken.

"I can't think," she answered. "I'm frightened."

Fear’s the enemy of thought. Think, Anna. Consider what you ought to do.

She let her head clear, let the fear drain from her mind. Slowly her pulse normalized. She took one of the hammers from her belt and held it up.

“I need to mark my way.”

Slipping the hammer back into his holster, she slipped the pack from her shoulder and took out the notebook.

“I’ll make a map.”

It was what she should have done to begin with, but it was too late now. The best she could do now was to slowly chart her way back to that first straight tunnel, before the way had branched. How long that would take she did not know, but if she was methodical, if she marked each tunnel wall, each branch of it with a letter and a number, then maybe, after a while, she would see the pattern of it on the page.

It was a slender chance, but her best.

Anna turned, looking about her. The tunnel sloped down. Just beyond her it forked. She walked across and, slipping her notebook into her tunic pocket, took the hammer and chisel from her belt.

The first blow was solid—she could feel the way the hammer hit the handle of the chisel squarely and firmly—but the wall was unmarked. She stared at it in astonishment, then repeated the blow. Nothing. There was not even a scratch on the green-black surface.

It was just as before, when she had tried to take the sample.

Anna groaned. It had been her only hope. Now she really was lost.

Paper wraps stone. So use paper. Squares of paper.

Of course! She could tear pages from her notebook and leave tiny squares of paper on the floor beside each entrance. It would have exactly the same effect. At once she tore a page from the book and tore it in half, then in half again. Four pieces. It wasn’t enough. She’d soon work her way through her stock of paper. She would have to leave much smaller pieces. She tore them in half again, and then a fourth time.

There. That should do it. She had about fifty pages—that ought to be enough.

Crouching, she began to write on them—AI to AI6. She would allocate two pages to each letter, and then move on to the next. That way she would hopefully chart “areas” of the labyrinth. And if she came back

to one of them, say C, she would know exactly where she was on her map, and be able to turn away in a different direction, until she knew exactly how it all fit together.

Anna looked up, smiling grimly. She wasn't beaten yet.

§

The Guild House was in the oldest part of town, surrounded by the halls of all the major guilds. From its steps one could look out over the great sprawl of D'ni to the harbor and the great arch named after the legendary prince Kerath.

Turning from the steps through a row of fluted marble pillars, one entered a massive vestibule of irregular shape. Here, set into the floor, was a great mosaic map of the main cavern of D'ni, while the floors of the smaller rooms, leading directly off the vestibule, displayed similar mosaic maps of the lesser caverns.

The ceiling of the vestibule was not high—barely twice the height of a standing man—yet it had a pleasant look to it. Great arching beams of pale mauve stone thrust out from the walls on every side, thinning to a lacelike delicacy as they met overhead.

On the right-hand side of the main room was a great arched door. The carved stone fanned about the doorway had the look of trees, forming a natural arch in some woodland glade. Beyond it was the great Council chamber.

It had long been a standing joke that the D'ni would never excavate to the east of the main cavern, lest they had to redesign the Guild House, but the truth was that the rock to the east was home to a stable reservoir of magma, slowly cooling over the millennia, from which they had long tapped energy.

Stepping through the massively hinged doors—each door a great slab of stone three feet thick and ten high—one entered the most impressive of D'ni's many chambers. The great dome of the ceiling seemed far overhead, eighteen huge pillars reaching up like massive arms to support it. Broad steps, which also served as seats, led down into a circular pit, in the midst of which were five huge basalt thrones.

The great shields of the guilds hung on the outer walls, along with their ancient banners.

Today the thrones were occupied, the great steps filled with seated members, here to debate whether the edict banning contact with the "outsiders," the "surface-dwellers" as they were otherwise known, should be lifted.

For six hours they had sat, listening to the arguments for and against, but now the debate was finally coming to a close. The young Lord Veovis was speaking, standing at his place on the second steps, just before the thrones, summing up the case for maintaining things as they were, his confident eloquence making many of the older members nod their heads and smile.

As Veovis sat, there was the sound of fists drumming on the stone —the D'ni way of signaling approval. He looked about him, smiling modestly, accepting the silent looks of praise.

Across from him, just behind the thrones and to the right, some six steps up, Aitrus looked on, concerned now that the time had almost come. Veovis still thought he was going to abstain. Indeed, he was counting on it, for the matter was so finely poised that a vote or two might well decide it. But he could not abstain, and though he knew he might well damage their friendship, he had to do what he believed was right.

But knowing that made it no easier.

There was a brief murmur in the chamber, and then Lord Eneah slowly raised himself up out of his throne, his frail figure commanding the immediate attention of all. Silence fell.

Lord Eneah had been gravely ill, and his voice now as he spoke seemed fatigued; yet there was still a strength behind it.

"We have heard the arguments, Guildsmen, and many among you will have already decided what you think. Yet this is a grave matter, and before we take the irrevocable step of a vote, I feel there should be the opportunity for a more *informed* debate of the matters raised. We shall come to a vote in an hour, but first we shall adjourn this sitting and retire to the vestibule."

If some were disappointed by this, they did not show it, while others nodded, as if the decision were wisdom itself. The D'ni were a patient race, after all, and many matters that might have been decided

“hastily” in the chamber had been resolved in the more informal atmosphere of the vestibule.

The remaining Lords rose to their feet and made their way out, followed a moment later by the other members of the great Council.

If the great chamber had been all solemnity and dignity, the vestibule was buzzing with talk, as members went from group to group, attempting to persuade others to their cause.

Rarely in recent years had a single issue raised so much heat and passion, and now that a vote was but an hour off, both camps made great efforts to win last-minute converts to their causes.

Aitrus, who had drifted into the vestibule alone, stood beneath the great arch a moment, looking across to where Veovis stood beside Lord Eneah, who sat in a chair that had been brought out especially for him. Veovis was addressing a small crowd of elder members, undaunted by the fact that many there were a century or two older than he. Such confidence impressed Aitrus, and he knew for certain that Veovis would one day sit where Lord Eneah had sat today, in the central throne.

It was not the right time, not just now, when Veovis was among such company, yet he would have to speak to him, to tell him of his change of mind, before they returned to the great chamber.

Aitrus made his way across, smiling and greeting other guildsmen as he went. Yet he was barely halfway across when he noticed a disturbance on the far side of the vestibule.

He craned his neck, trying to see. The door guards were arguing with someone. Then, abruptly, it seemed, they stood back, allowing the newcomer to pass. It was a senior guildsman from the Guild of Messengers. In one hand he clutched a sealed letter.

As the Council members began to realize that there was an intruder among them, the noise in the vestibule slowly died. Heads turned. Guildsmen turned to face the newcomer as he made his way between them, heading directly to where Lord Eneah sat.

The vestibule and chamber were normally sacrosanct. To permit a Messenger to enter while they were in session was almost unheard of. This had to be a matter of the greatest urgency.

By the time the Messenger stepped out before Lord Eneah, a complete silence had fallen over the vestibule. Kneeling, the man bowed his head and held the letter out.

At a gesture from Lord Eneah, Veovis took the letter and, breaking the seal, handed it to the elder. Eneah slowly unfolded the single sheet, then, lifting his chin and peering at it, began to read. After a moment he looked up, a faint bemusement in his eyes.

"Guildsmen," he said, "it appears the decision has been made for us. We have a visitor. An outsider from the surface."

There was a moment's stunned silence, followed by a sudden uproar in the chamber.

PART THREE: FAULT LINES

For the rest of that day the high-council—the five Great Lords and the eighteen Grand Masters—sat in special session to decide what should be done.

While they were meeting, rumors swept the great city in the cavern. Many concerned the *nature* of the intruder, speculating upon what manner of creature had been taken by the Maintainers. While most agreed that it was humanoid in form, some claimed it was a cross between a bear and an ape. Other rumors were wilder yet. One such tale had it that a whole tribe of outsiders—heavily armed savages, intent on trouble—had come far down the tunnels, trying to force entry into D'ni, and that it had taken the whole garrison of Maintainers, backed up by the City Guard, to fight them off.

Such "news," Aitrus was certain, was completely unfounded, yet in the absence of hard fact even he found himself caught up in the games of speculation—so much so, that as evening fell and the lake waters dimmed, he left his rooms and set out through the narrow alleyways of the upper town, intending to visit the Hall of the Guild of Writers where his friend Veovis dwelt.

If anyone outside that central group of Lords and Masters knew what was happening, Veovis would.

Arriving at the gate of the ancient hall, Aitrus waited in the tiny courtyard before the main doors while a steward was sent to notify Veovis of his presence.

Several minutes passed, and then the steward returned.

Aitrus followed him through, between high, fluted pillars and along a broad mosaic path that bisected Ri'Neref's Hall, the first of five great halls named after the greatest of the guild's sons. Like most of the ancient Guild Halls, the Hall of the Guild of Writers was not a single building but a complex of interlinked buildings and rooms, some of them cut deep into the face of the great cavern. As Aitrus ventured farther into the complex, he climbed up narrow flights of ancient steps, the stone of which seemed almost to have been melted over time, like wax, eroded by the passage of countless feet over the six millennia of D'ni's existence.

Here, in this great sprawl of ancient stone, two thousand guildsmen lived and ate and slept. Here they were educated, here went about the simple daily business of the guild. Here also were the book rooms and great libraries of the guild, the like of which could be found nowhere else in D'ni.

Walking through its ancient hallways, Aitrus felt the huge weight of history that lay behind the Writers Guild. Though the Writers claimed no special privileges, nor had a greater voice than any other on the Council, it was held to be the most prestigious of the Eighteen, and its members had a sense of that.

To be a Writer, that was the dream of many a D'ni boy.

The steward slowed, then stopped before a door. Turning to Aitrus, he bowed again. "We are here, Master."

Aitrus waited while the steward knocked.

A voice, Veovis's, called from within. "Enter!"

The steward pushed the door open a little and looked inside. "Forgive me, Guild Master, but it is Master Aitrus, from the Guild of Surveyors."

"Show him in."

As the steward pushed the door back, Aitrus stepped forward. Veovis was in his chair on the far side of the big, low-ceilinged study. Books filled the walls on every side. A portrait of Rakeri, Veovis's father, hung on the wall behind a huge oak-topped desk. In tall-backed chairs close by sat two other men—one old, one young. The elder Aitrus recognized as Lianis, Veovis's tutor and chief adviser, the younger was Suahrnir, Veovis's Maintainer friend.

"Ah, Aitrus," Veovis said, getting up, a broad smile lighting his features. "Welcome, dear friend."

Aitrus heard the door close quietly behind him. “Forgive me for intruding, Veovis, but I wondered if you had any news.”

Veovis came over and took his hands, then, stepping back, gestured toward the chair beside his own. “It is curious that you should arrive just at this moment. Suahrnir has just come from the Guild House. It seems the High Council has finished deliberating. A notice is to be posted throughout the city within the hour.”

“So what *is* the news?”

Veovis sat. The smile had gone from his face. “There are to be special Hearings, before the Council.”

Aitrus sat, looking to his friend. “Hearings? What kind of Hearings?”

Veovis sat. The smile had gone from his face. “There are to be special Hearings, before the Council.”

Aitrus sat, looking to his friend. “Hearings? What kind of Hearings?”

Veovis shrugged. “All I know so far is that the outsider is to be interrogated, and that we, as Council members, will be allowed to witness the interrogation. My assumption is that the questions will have to do with the nature of life on the surface.”

“He speaks D’ni?”

“Not a word. And it is not a he, Aitrus. The outsider is a female.”

Aitrus blinked with surprise. “A woman?”

“A girl. A young girl, so I am told, barely out of infancy.”

Aitrus shook his head. It was difficult to believe that anyone, let alone a young girl, could have made her way down from the surface. He frowned. “But if she speaks no D’ni, then how are we to question her?”

“Who can say?” Veovis answered, the slightest hint of irony in his voice. “But it appears she is to be handed over to the Guild of Linguists. They are to try to make sense of her strange utterances. That is the idea, anyway. Personally, I would be surprised if she does more than grunt for her food when she wants it.”

“You think so?”

“Oh, I am quite certain of it, Aitrus. Word is that she is a rather large-boned animal, and totally covered in hair.”

“In hair?”

Veovis nodded. “But I guess that, too, is to be expected, no? After all, one would need some kind of special covering to protect the body against the elements, wouldn’t one?”

“I suppose so.”

“And besides, some creatures find that *attractive*, or so I am told.”

There was laughter, but Aitrus was silent, wondering just what circumstances would force a young girl—whatever her species—to venture down the tunnels. It was not, after all, what one would expect.

“Is there any way I could see her?” Aitrus asked.

“I doubt it,” Veovis answered. “Word is she is being kept on an island in the cavern of Irrat. The Linguists will have her locked away for months, no doubt. You know how *thorough* they are!”

“Besides,” Veovis went on, “it is unlikely any of us will get a glimpse of her before the Hearings. If what Suahrnir says is true, almost half of the High Council were in favor of shipping her out to a Prison Age straight away, and having done with the matter. Only Lord Eneah’s personal intervention prevented such a course.”

“But she’s only a girl.”

“Sentiment, Aitrus,” Suahrnir chipped in. “Pure sentiment. A girl she may be, but she is not D’ni. We cannot attribute her with the same intelligence or sensitivity we D’ni possess. And as for her being *only* a girl, you cannot argue that. Her mere existence here in D’ni has thrown the people into turmoil. They talk of nothing else. Nor will they until this matter is resolved. No. Her arrival here is a bad thing. It will unsettle the common people.”

Aitrus was amazed by Suahrnir’s vehemence. “Do you really think so, Suahrnir?”

“Suahrnir is right, Aitrus,” Veovis said quietly. “We might joke about it, but this issue is a serious one, and had my own opinion been sought, I, too, would have advocated placing her somewhere where she can trouble the public imagination as little as possible.”

Aitrus sighed. “I hear what you are saying. Maybe it *will* unsettle people. Yet it would be a great shame, surely, if we did not attempt to discover all we can about conditions up there on the surface?”

“We know now that it is inhabited. Is that not enough?”

Aitrus looked down. He did not want to be drawn into an argument with his friend over this issue.

“Still,” Veovis added, when he did not answer, “the matter is out of our hands, eh, old friend? The High Council have decreed that there shall be Hearings and so there shall, whether I will it or no. Let us pray, then, that the Linguists—good men though they are—fail to make sense of the creature this one time.”

Aitrus glanced up and saw that Veovis was smiling teasingly. Slowly that smile faded. “Nothing but trouble can come of this, Aitrus, I warrant you. *Nothing* but trouble.”

§

Guild Master Haemis locked the door to the cell, then turned, facing his pupil. She sat there behind the narrow desk, quiet and attentive, the light blue robe they had put her in making her seem more like a young acolyte than a prisoner.

“And how are you, this morning, Ah-na?”

“I am well, Master Haemis,” she answered, the slight harshness in her pronunciation still there, but much less noticeable than it had been.

“Thoe Kenem, Nava,” she said. How are you, Master?

Haemis smiled, pleased with her. They had begun by trying simply to translate her native speech, to find D’ni equivalents for everyday objects and simple actions, but to his surprise she had begun to turn the tables on them, pointing to objects and, by means of facial gesture, coaxing him to name them. The quickness of her mind had astonished them all. By the eighth week she had been speaking basic D’ni phrases. It was baby-talk, true, but still quite remarkable, considering where she came from.

Twenty weeks on and she was almost fluent. Each day she extended her vocabulary, pushing them to teach her all they knew.

“Is it just you today, Master Haemis?”

Haemis sat, facing her. “Grand Master Gihran will be joining us later, Ah-na. But for the first hour it is just you and I.” He smiled. “So? What shall we do today?”

Her eyes, their dark pupils still disturbingly strange after all this time, stared back at him. “The book you mentioned…the *Rehevkor*… Might I see a copy of it?”

The question disconcerted him. He had not meant to tell her about the D'ni lexicon. It was their brief to tell her as little as possible about D'ni ways. But she was such a good pupil that he had relaxed his guard.

"That will not be easy, Ah-na. I would have to get permission from the Council for such a step."

"Permission?"

Haemis looked down, embarrassed. "I should not, perhaps, tell you this, but…I should not have mentioned the existence of the *Rehevkor* to you. It was a slip. If my fellow Masters should discover it…"

"You would be in trouble?"

He nodded, then looked up. Anna was watching him earnestly.

"Then I will say nothing more, Master Haemis."

"Thank you, Ah-na."

"Not at all," she said softly. "You have been very kind to me."

He gave a little nod, embarrassed once more, not knowing quite what to say, but she broke the silence.

"Will you answer me one thing, Master Haemis?"

"If I can."

"What do they think of me? Your fellow Masters, I mean. What do they *really* think of me?"

It was a strange and unexpected question. He had not thought it would have bothered her.

"To be honest, most of them saw you at first as some kind of grinning primitive animal."

Haemis glanced at her and saw how she digested that fact; saw how thoughtful it made her look.

"And you, Master Haemis? What did *you* think?"

He could not look at her. Even so, there was something about her that compelled his honesty. "I thought no differently."

She was quiet a moment, then. "Thank you, Master Haemis."

Haemis swallowed, then, finding the courage to look at her again, said quietly, "I do not think so now."

"I know."

"I…I will speak for you at the Hearings, if you wish."

Anna smiled. "Once more, your kindness does you great credit, Master Haemis. But I must speak for myself when the time comes. Else they, too, will think me but an animal, no?"

Haemis nodded, impressed by her bearing, by the strength that seemed to underlie every aspect of her nature.

"I shall ask," he said quietly.

"Ask?" She stared at him, not understanding.

"About the *Rehevkor*."

"But you said…"

"It does not matter," Haemis said, realizing that for once it mattered very little beside her good opinion of him. "Besides, we cannot have you going unprepared before the Council, can we, Ah-na?"

§

Anna stood by the window of her cell, looking out across the cavern she had been told was called Irrat. The bleakness of the view did little to raise her spirits. The sill into which the great iron bars were set was four feet thick, the view itself of rock and yet more rock, only one small, rust red pool creating a focal point of contrast in that iron gray landscape.

Master Haemis had been kind to her today, and she sensed that maybe he was even her friend, yet he was only one among many. For all his small kindnesses, she was still alone here, still a prisoner in this strange, twilight world where the days were thirty hours long and the seasons unchanging.

Anna sighed, a rare despondency descending upon her. She had tried her best to learn their language and find out something that might help her—she had even enjoyed that task—yet where she was or who these people were she still did not know.

She turned, looking across at the door. Like all else here it was made of stone. Her bed was a stone pallet, cut into the rock of the wall. Likewise, a small shelf-table had been cut from the stone. On the bed was a thin blanket, folded into squares, and a pillow; on the table was a jug of water and a bowl.

Anna walked across and sat on the edge of the stone pallet, her hands clenched together between her knees. For a time she sat there, staring blankly at the floor, then she looked up.

The door had opened silently, unnoticed by her. An elderly man now stood there; tall, dignified, in a long dark cloak edged with the same shade of burgundy the guards who had captured her had worn.

His eyes, like theirs, were pale. His face, like theirs, was tautly fleshed, the bone structure extremely fine, as if made of the most delicate porcelain. His long, gray-white hair, like theirs, was brushed back neatly from a high, pale brow.

But he was old. Far older than any of those she had so far seen. She could see the centuries piled up behind that thin-lipped mouth, those pale, cold eyes.

She waited, expecting him to talk, but he merely looked at her, then, as if he had seen enough, glanced around he cell. Behind him, in the half shadows of the passageway, stood Master Haemis and one of the guards. He took a step toward the door. As he did, Anna stood, finding her voice.

“Forgive me, sir, but might I draw you?”

He turned back, a look of surprise in those pale, clear eyes.

“My sketch pad,” she said. “It was in my knapsack, together with my charcoal sticks. It would help me pass the time if I had them.”

There was the slightest narrowing of his eyes, then he turned and left the cell. The door swung silently shut.

Anna sat again, feeling more depressed than ever. She had seen the unfeeling coldness in the old man’s face and sensed that her fate had been sealed in that brief moment when he had looked at her.

“So what now?”

She spoke the words quietly, as if afraid they would be overheard, yet she had little more to fear now. She let her head fall, for an instant or two sinking down into a kind of stupor where she did not need to think. But then the image of the old man’s face returned to her.

She recalled his surprise, that narrowing of the eyes, and wondered if she had somehow made a brief connection with him.

“Miss?”

Anna looked up, surprised to be spoken to after so lengthy a silence. Again there had been no warning of the woman’s presence before she had spoken.

“Here,” the woman said, stepping across and placing a tray onto the table at Anna’s side. The smell of hot soup and fresh-baked bread

wafted across to Anna, making her mouth water.

As the woman stepped back, Anna stood, surprised to see that instead of the usual sparse fare, this time the tray was filled with all manner of foods; a tumbler of bright red drink, another of milk, a small granary loaf. And more.

Anna turned to thank the woman, but she was gone. A guard now stood there in the doorway, expressionless, holding something out to her. It was her sketch pad and her charcoals.

Astonished, she took them from him, nodding her head in thanks. She had asked a hundred times, but no one had listened to her. Until now.

The door closed behind the woman.

Anna put her things down, then, taking the tray onto her lap, began to eat.

He listened, yes, but what does that mean?

Was this simply the courtesy they extended to every prisoner? And was this to be her life henceforth, incarcerated in this bleak stone cell?

And if so, could she endure that?

At least she had the sketch pad now. She could use the back of it, perhaps, to write down all her thoughts and observations, something she had sorely missed these past six months. And then there were always the sessions with Master Haemis to look forward to—her struggles with that strange, delightful language.

For a moment she sat there, perfectly still, the food in her mouth unchewed. That face—the old man's face. If she could draw *that*, then maybe she would begin to understand just who he was and what he wanted of her. For the secret was there, in the features of a man, or so her mother had once said.

Stone-faced, he'd seemed. Yet if she could chip the surface stone away and see what lay behind.

Anna set the tray back on the table, then yawned, feeling suddenly tired, in need of sleep.

She would make the sketch later, when she woke.

Unfolding the blanket, Anna stretched out on the pallet and lay it over her, closing her eyes. In a moment she was asleep.

§

The captain paused a moment, studying the sketch, impressed despite himself that she had captured the old man's face so perfectly. Then, closing the sketch pad, he turned and handed it to her, before pointing toward the open doorway.

"Come. It's time to go."

Gathering up her charcoals, Anna tucked them into her pocket, then looked across at him. "Where are you taking me?"

He did not answer, merely gestured toward the door.

Anna stepped outside, letting the guards fall in, two to the front of her, two just behind. This time, however, no one bound her hands.

As the captain emerged, they came smartly to attention, then set off at a march, Anna in their midst, hurrying to keep pace.

A long stairway led down through solid rock, ending in a massive gateway, the stone door of which had been raised into a broad black slit in the ceiling overhead. They passed beneath it and out onto a great slab of rock, still within the cavern yet outside the stone keep in which Anna had been kept. She looked back at it, surprised by the brutality of its construction.

They slowed. Just ahead, the rock fell away almost vertically into a chasm on three sides, a chain bridge spanning that massive gap, linking the fortress to a circular archway carved into the far wall of the cavern. Stepping out onto the bridge, Anna looked down, noting the huge machines that seemed to squat like black-limbed fishermen beside dark fissures in the earth. Machines, no doubt, like those she had found up near the surface. There were buildings down there, too, and chimneys and huge piles of excavated rock, like a giant's building blocks, all far below the narrow, swaying bridge. She was not afraid of heights, nor of falling, but even if she had, the guards would have paid no heed. They moved on relentlessly, nudging her when she was not quick enough.

The arch in the far wall proved to be ornamental. Just beyond the great carved hoop of stone lay a wall of solid rock; black marble, polished smooth. She thought perhaps they would stop, but the captain marched on, as if he would walk straight through the rock itself.

As they passed beneath the arch, however, he turned abruptly to the right, into deep shadow. More steps led down. At the foot of them was a

door. As he unlocked it, Anna looked to the captain, wanting to ask him where they were taking her and what would happen there, but he was like a machine, distant and impersonal, programmed to carry out his tasks efficiently and silently, his men mute copies of himself, each face expressionless.

She understood. They did not like her. Nor did they wish to take the chance of liking her.

Beyond the door the passage zigzagged through the rock, small cresset lamps set into the stone. And then they were "outside" again, in another cavern.

Anna stepped out, looking about her. A great bluff of rock lay to her right, obscuring the view. To her left, just below her and about a hundred yards or so away, a broad coil of water cut its way through a steep-sided chasm. It was not as dark here as in the first cavern. She did not understand that at first. Then, to her surprise, she saw how the water gave off a steady glow that underlit everything.

They went down the bare, rocky slope, then along a path that led to a stone jetty. There, at the foot of a flight of steep, black basalt steps, a long, dark, elegant boat was anchored, the chasm walls towering above it. Four burgundy-cloaked oarsmen waited patiently on their bench seats, their oars shipped. A burgundy-colored banner hung limply from the stern of the boat, beside the ornamental cabin, a strangely intricate symbol emblazoned in gold in its center. Anna stared at it as she clambered aboard, intrigued by its complexity.

"Where are we?" she asked.

The captain turned to her, giving her a cold, hard look, his eyes suspicious of her. For a moment she thought he would not answer her, then, curtly, he said:

"We are in D'ni. This is the main cavern."

"Ah…" But it did not enlighten her. *Duh-nee*. That was what it had sounded like. But where was *Duh-nee?* Deep in the earth? No, that simply wasn't possible. People didn't *live* deep in the earth, under the rock. Or did they? Wasn't that, after all, what she had been staring at every day for these past six months? Rock, and yet more rock.

The securing rope was cast off, the oarsmen to her left pushed away from the side. Suddenly they were gliding down the channel, the huge walls slipping past her as the oars dug deep in unison.

Anna turned, looking back, her eyes going up to the great carved circle of the arch that had been cut into the massive stone wall of the cave; a counterpart, no doubt, to the arch on the far side. The wall itself went up and up and up. She craned her neck, trying to see where it ended, but the top of it was in shadow.

She sniffed the air. Cool, clean air, like the air of the northern mountains of her home.

Outside. They *had* to be outside. Yet the captain had said quite clearly that this was a cavern.

She shook her head in disbelief. No cavern she had ever heard of was this big. It had to be …*miles* across. Turning, she looked to the captain. He was standing at the prow, staring directly ahead. Beyond him, where the channel turned to the right, a bridge had come into view—a pale, lacelike thing of stone, spanning the chasm, the carving on its three, high-arched spans as delicate as that on a lady's ivory fan.

Passing under the bridge the channel broadened, the steep sides of the chasm giving way to the gentler, more rounded slope of hills, the gray and black of rock giving way to a mosslike green. Ahead of them lay a lake of some kind, the jagged shapes of islands visible in the distance, strangely dark amid that huge expanse of glowing water.

At first Anna did not realize what she was looking at; then, with a start, she saw that what she had thought were strange outcrops of rock were, in fact, buildings; strangely shaped buildings that mimicked the flowing forms of molten rock. Buildings that had no roofs.

That last made a strange and sudden sense to her. So they *were* inside. And the water. Of course…Something must be in the water to make it glow like that.

As the boat glided out onto the lake itself, Anna took in for the first time the sheer scale of the cavern.

"It's magnificent," she said quietly, awed by it.

The captain turned, glancing at her, surprised by her words. Then, as if conceding something to her, he pointed to his right.

"There. That is where we are headed. See? Just beyond the bluff. It will come into sight in a moment."

There was a pillar of some kind—a lighthouse maybe, or a monument—just beyond the great heap of rock that lay directly to their

right, the top of it jutting up above the bluff. Yet as they rounded the headland, she saw, with astonishment, that the pillar was not as close as she had presumed. Indeed, it lay a good two or three miles distant.

"But it's…"

"Over three hundred and fifty spans high."

Anna stared at the great column of twisted rock that lay at the center of the glowing lake. Three hundred and fifty spans! That was over a mile by her own measure! Somehow it didn't seem natural. The rock looked as if it had been shaped by some giant hand. Looking at it, she wasn't sure whether it was hideous or beautiful; her eyes were not trained to appreciate so alien an aesthetic.

"What is it called?"

"The ancients called it Ae'Gura," he answered. "but we simply call it The Island. The city is beyond it, to its right."

"The city?"

But it was clear that he felt he had said too much already. He looked away, falling silent once again, only the swish of the oars in the water and the creak of the boat as it moved across the lake breaking the eerie silence.

§

Veovis sat in the corridor outside Lord Eneah's study, waiting, while, beyond the door, the elders finished their discussion.

He had been summoned at a moment's notice, brought here in the Great Lord's own sedan. That alone said much. Something must have happened—something that the elders wished urgently to consult him about.

Veovis smiled. He had known these men since childhood. He had seen them often with his father, in both formal and informal settings. They ate little and spoke only when a matter of some importance needed uttering. Most of what was "said" between them was a matter of eye contact and bodily gesture, for they had known each other now two centuries and more, and there was little they did not know of each other. He, on the other hand, represented a more youthful, vigorous strain of D'ni

thinking. He was, as they put it, “in touch” with the living pulse of D’ni culture.

Veovis knew that and accepted it. indeed, he saw it as his role to act as a bridge between the Five and the younger members of the Council, to reconcile their oft-differing opinions and come up with solutions that were satisfactory to all. Like many of his class, Veovis did not like, nor welcome, conflict, for conflict meant change and change was anathema to him. The Five had long recognized that and had often called on him to help defuse potentially difficult situations before push came to shove.

And so now, unless he was mistaken.

As the door eased open, Veovis got to his feet. Lord Eneah himself stood there, framed in the brightly lit doorway, looking out at him.

“Veovis. Come.”

He bowed, his respect genuine. “Lord Eneah.”

Stepping into the room, he looked about him, bowing to each of the Great Lords in turn, his own father last of all. It was exactly as he had expected; only the Five were here. All others were excluded from this conversation.

As Eneah sat again, in the big chair behind his desk, Veovis stood, feet slightly apart, waiting.

“It is about the intruder,” Eneah said without preamble.

“It seems she is ready,” Lord Nehir of the Stone-Masons, seated to Veovis’s right, added.

“Ready, my Lords?”

“Yes, Veovis,” Eneah said, his eyes glancing from one to another of his fellows, as if checking that what he was about to say had their full approval. “Far more ready, in fact, than we had anticipated.”

“How so, my Lord?”

“She speaks D’ni,” Lord R’hira of the Maintainers answered.

Veovis felt a shock wave pass through him. “I beg your pardon, Lord R’hira?”

But R’hira merely stared at him. “Think of it, Veovis. Think what that means.”

But Veovis could not think. The very idea was impossible. It had to be some kind of joke. A test of him, perhaps. Why, his father had said nothing to him of this!

“I…”

“Grand Master Gihran of the Guild of Linguists visited us earlier today,” Lord Eneah said, leaning forward slightly. “His report makes quite remarkable reading. We were aware, of course, that some progress was being made, but just how much took us all by surprise. It would appear that our guest is ready to face a Hearing.”

Veovis frowned. “I do not understand…”

“It is very simple,” Lord Nehir said, his soft voice breaking in. “We must decide what is to be done. Whether we should allow the young woman to speak openly before the whole Council, or whether she should be heard behind closed doors, by those who might be trusted to keep what is heard to themselves.”

“The High Council?”

His father, Lord Rakeri, laughed gruffly. “No, Veovis. We mean the Five.”

Veovis went to speak then stopped, understanding suddenly what they wanted of him.

Lord Eneah, watching his face closely, nodded. “That is right, Veovis. We want you to make soundings for us. This is a delicate matter, after all. It might, of course, be safe to let the girl speak openly. On the other hand, who knows what she might say? As the custodians of D’ni, it is our duty to assess the risk.”

Veovis nodded, then, “Might I suggest something, my Lords?”

Eneah looked about him. “Go on.”

“Might we not float the idea of *two* separate Hearings? The first before the Five, and then a second—possibly—once you have had the opportunity to judge things for yourselves?”

“You mean, promise something that we might not ultimately grant?”

“The second Hearing would be dependent on the success of the first. That way you have safeguards. And if things go wrong…”

Eneah was smiling now, a wintry smile. “Excellent,” he said. “Then we shall leave it to you, Veovis. Report back to us within three days. If all is well, we shall see the girl a week from now.”

Veovis bowed low. “As you wish, my Lords.”

He was about to turn and leave, when his father, Rakeri, called him back. “Veovis?”

“Yes, father?”

“Your friend, Aitrus.”

“What of him, father?”

“Recruit him if you can. He’s a useful fellow, and well liked among the new members. With him on your side things should prove much easier.”

Veovis smiled, then bowed again. “As you wish, father.” Then, with a final nod to each of them in turn, he left.

§

Eneah sat at his desk long after they had gone, staring at the open sketch pad and the charcoal image of his face. It was some time since he had stared at himself so long or seen himself so clearly, and the thought of what he had become, of the way that time and event had carved his once familiar features, troubled him.

He was, by nature, a thoughtful man; even so, his thoughts were normally directed outward, at that tiny, social world embedded in the rock about him. Seldom did he stop to consider the greater world within himself. But the girl’s drawing had reminded him. He could see now how hope and loss, ambition and disappointment, idealism and the longer, more abiding pressures of responsibility, had marked his flesh. He had thought his face a kind of mask, a stone lid upon the years, but he had been wrong: It was all there, engraved in the pale stone of his skin, as on a tablet, for all who wished to read.

If she is typical…

The uncompleted thought, like the drawing, disturbed him deeply. When he had agreed to the Hearings, he had thought, as they had all thought, that the matter was a straightforward one. The savage would be brought before them, and questioned, and afterward disposed of—humanely, to a Prison Age—and then, in time, forgotten. But the girl was not a simple savage.

Eneah closed the sketch pad, then sighed wearily.

“If she is typical…”

§

“Veovis?”

Veovis looked up, no sign of his normal cheeriness in his face. He looked tired, as if he had not slept.

“Ah, Aitrus. I’m glad you’ve come.”

Veovis gestured to the chair facing him. They were in the great Common Room in the Writers Guild Hall. The huge, square room was filled with big, tall-backed armchairs. It was a favorite place for guildsmen to come and talk, but few of the chairs were filled at this early hour of the day.

Veovis smiled faintly, then looked at him. “Lord Eneah summoned me last night.”

“And?”

Veovis lowered his voice. “And they want me to help them.”

“In what way?”

“They want to cancel the Hearings.”

Aitrus sat forward. “But Lord Eneah announced the Hearings before the full Council. He cannot simply *cancel* them!”

“Exactly. And that is why he hopes I can persuade individual members to let the matter drop.”

“Is that why I am here? To be persuaded?”

“No, old friend. You will decide as you decide. But my father wanted me to speak to you, and so here you are.”

“I don’t follow you, Veovis.”

“He wants you to help me. He thinks you might.”

“And what did you say to him?”

“I said I would speak to you. No more.”

Aitrus laughed. “Come now. No games. Do you want my help or don’t you?”

Veovis smiled. “I’d welcome it. If you’d give it.”

“Then you had better tell me everything.”

§

That evening Aitrus did not return to his rooms in the Guild Hall, but went back to the family home in the Jaren District, which was in the upper northeast of the city, overlooking the Park of the Ages. His mother was delighted to see him, but it was his father, Kahlis, he had come to see.

Stepping back from her embrace, Aitrus looked toward the polished stone stairway that led up to the second floor.

"Is Father in his study?"

"He is, but he is very busy, Aitrus. He has a report to finish for the morning."

Kahlis looked up as Aitrus entered the big, book-lined room, and smiled wearily at him from behind a great stack of papers he was working on. "Ah, Aitrus. How are you?"

"Can I speak with you, Father?"

Kahlis glanced at the paper before him, then, setting his pen back in the inkstand, sat back.

"It is important, I take it?"

Aitrus stepped across and took a seat, facing him. "This matter with the intruder bothers me."

"How so?"

"I went to see Veovis early this morning. He asked me to call on him at his Guild Hall. His mood was…strange. I asked him what it was, and he said he had been asked to undertake a task, on behalf of the Five, and that he needed my help."

"And you promised you would help him?"

"Yes."

"So what exactly is the problem?"

"I do not like what I am doing, Father. I gave my word before I understood what was involved."

"That is most unlike you, Aitrus."

"Perhaps. But Veovis is my friend. To refuse him would have been difficult."

"I understand. But what exactly is it that you find so difficult about the 'task' the Five have given you?"

Aitrus stared at his father. "You have heard nothing, then?"

"What ought I to have heard?"

"That the girl now speaks fluent D'ni."

Kahlis laughed. “You jest with me, Aitrus. Word was she could barely grunt her own name!”

“Then word was wrong.”

Kahlis took that in, his expression sober suddenly. “I see. Then the Hearings will be soon, I take it.”

“That is just it,” Aitrus said. “The Five no longer want to hold such hearings—not before the full Council, anyway. They want the sessions to be held in private, with only themselves in attendance. And they have charged Veovis and myself with the job of persuading members of the Council to that viewpoint.”

Kahlis stared at him. “I am glad you came to me, Aitrus, before any damage could be done. Lord Eneah made a promise to the full Council, and that promise must be upheld.”

Kahlis stood and came around his desk. Aitrus also stood, turning to face his father. “So what will you do?”

“I will go and see Lord Eneah, now, before this matter goes any further. I will tell him that I have heard rumors and that I want his confirmation that they are untrue.”

“Then you will say nothing of my part in this?”

“Of course.” Kahlis held his son’s arms briefly. “Do not worry, Aitrus. I understand the delicacy of your predicament. If Veovis thinks you came to me, he will blame you for whatever trouble follows. But I shall make sure that Lord Eneah does not get that impression.”

“Yet he might guess…”

Kahlis smiled. “Between guessing and knowing is a long dark tunnel. I know it is not in your nature to deceive, Aitrus, but it might be kinder on your friend—yes, and on yourself—if you kept this meeting with me to yourself.”

Aitrus bowed. “I had best go, then.”

“Yes. And Aitrus, thank you. You did the right thing.”

§

Lord Eneah was already in bed when his servant knocked on the door.

“Yes, Jedur, what is it?”

A face only a degree or two less ancient than his own poked around the door and stared at him.

"It is Grand Master Kahlis, my Lord. He knows the hour is late, but he begs a meeting. He says it is of the gravest importance."

Eneah sighed, then slowly sat up. "Ask Master Kahlis to allow me a moment to refresh myself, then I shall come and speak with him."

"My Lord." The wizened face disappeared.

Eneah slid his legs around and, throwing back the single cotton cover, put his feet down on the cold stone of the floor. There had been a time when he had enjoyed the luxuries his post had brought him, but nowadays he embraced simplicity in everything.

He walked across to the washstand in the corner of his spartanly-furnished bedroom and, pouring water from a jug into a bowl, washed his face and hands, drying himself with a small cloth.

His cloak of office hung on a peg behind the door. He took it down and pulled it on, buttoning it to the neck.

"There!" he said, smoothing one hand over what remained of his ash white hair, staring at his face in the small mirror he had had placed on the wall only two days ago. "Now let us see what Master Kahlis wants."

Kahlis was waiting in the study. As Lord Eneah entered the room, he stood hastily, bowing low.

"Forgive me, Lord Eneah…"

Eheah waved the apology away. "What is it, Kahlis? Has it to do with the plans for the new cavern?"

He knew it wasn't. Kahlis would hardly have got him from his bed for such a matter. No. He knew already what it was. In fact, he had half expected one or other of them to come to see him. The only surprise was that it was so soon.

As Eneah sat, Kahlis stepped forward, standing at the edge of his desk.

"No, my Lord, it has nothing to do with the plans for the new cavern. Rather, it is to do with certain rumors that have been circulating throughout the day."

"Rumors?" For a moment longer he played innocent, staring back at Kahlis hawkishly. "You wake me to talk of *rumors*, Master Kahlis?"

"I would not have bothered you with such, Lord Eneah, were they not concerned with a matter of the gravest importance."

“And what matter would this be?”

“The matter of the hearings.” Kahlis hesitated, then. “Word is that the Five wish to hold the hearings in secret, behind locked doors. Is that so, my Lord?”

For the first time, Eneah smiled. “It is so.”

Kahlis, who had clearly steeled himself for a denial, blinked. Then, “Might I ask why, my Lord?”

Eneah gestured to a chair. “Take a seat, Master Kahlis, and I shall try to explain. It might indeed help us were you to understand our thinking on this matter.”

§

Aitrus was seated at his desk in the corner of his study, trying to catch up on his work before he left for the Guild House, when there was a sharp rapping on his door. He stood, then went across and opened it. It was Veovis. Brushing past him, Veovis stormed across and threw himself down on the padded bench, his face dark with suppressed anger.

“Have you heard?”

“Heard? Heard what?”

“The Hearings. They are to go ahead, after all. The Five have changed their minds. They will take place a week from now.”

“Before full Council?”

Veovis nodded, but he was not looking at Aitrus; he was staring straight ahead of him, as if recalling the meeting he had just come from. “It is a mistake. I told Lord Eneah it was a mistake. And they will rue it. But he was adamant. A promise is a promise, he said. Well, I would not argue with that, yet circumstances change.”

“You think it might be dangerous, then, to let the girl speak?”

Veovis glanced at him. “Is there any doubt? No, the more I think of it, the more certain I am. The girl has a natural cunning. It is that, more than anything, that has allowed her to master our tongue.”

“You think so?”

“Oh, I know it. And I fear that she will use that same native cunning to try to manipulate the Council. Why, I have heard that she has

beguiled several of those who were sent to study her, weedling information from them when they least suspected it. And her audacity!”

Aitrus sat, facing Veovis. “Go on.”

Veovis sat forward, staring down at his hands where they were clenched in his lap. “It seems one of the Linguists, thrown off-guard by her act of youthful innocence, mistakenly mentioned the existence of the *Rehevkor* to her. She, it seems, elicited from him a promise to show her a copy of it.”

“But that is not allowed.”

“Precisely. Which is why a certain Guild Master Haemis has been removed from the study team.”

“Why did you not mention this to me before now?”

“Because I did not know until this morning.”

Aitrus sighed, then shook his head. “You must feel…let down.”

Veovis looked up at him, then nodded.

“So what will you do now?”

“Do?” There was a bitterness now in Veovis’s face that had not been there before. “I can do nothing. I must act the perfect son and sit upon my hands and bite my tongue.”

“Has your father instructed you so?”

“Not in so many words. But how else am I to interpret this?” He shook his head. “But they will rue it, I guarantee you, Aitrus. The girl is cunning.”

“You have seen her?”

“No. And yet I know her by her work. She is a savage, after all, and savages have no morality, only cunning. Her words, I fear, will poison many ears, persuading them to courses they would otherwise have shunned.”

“Then you must set your voice against hers.”

Veovis stared at Aitrus a moment; then, smiling, he nodded. “Yes. Yes, of course. It *must* be so. My voice against hers. Truth against trickery.” And now he grinned. “As ever, you are wisdom itself, Aitrus, yes, and a pillar to me in my despair!”

Veovis stood and came across, and embraced Aitrus. “Here, let me hug you, old friend. I came here despondent and you have filled me with new hope. It shall be as you said. I shall be the voice of reason, a fierce, strong light shining in the darkness.”

Veovis stood back, smiling into Aitrus's face. "And you, my friend? Will you speak out with me?"

"I shall speak the truth as I see it," Aitrus said. "I can promise you no more."

"Then let that be enough. For you will see, Aitrus, I promise you. Do not be blinded by her seeming innocence; think rather of the cunning that lies behind that mask. And as you see, so speak."

"I shall."

"Then good. I'll leave you to your work. And Aitrus?"

"Yes?"

"Thank you. You are the very best of friends."

§

The narrow alleyways of the lower city were crowded with onlookers as the procession made its way up that great slope of fashioned rock toward the Great Hall of the Guilds. A small troupe of the City Guard forced a way through, keeping the more curious from the huge palanquin that eight young guildsmen—Maintainers all—carried between two long poles.

From within the partly curtained palanquin, Anna sat in her chair, looking out at the sea of faces that had gathered to see the so-called outsider taken to the Hearings. Some called out to her in their strange tongue that she had yet to fully master, yet few of them seemed hostile. It was more as if she were a curio, an exotic beast captured in some foreign clime and brought back to be displayed before the court.

Anna looked about her, at the men, women, and children that had gathered simply to stare. There were thousands of them, yet every face had that same strange elongation of the features, that almost-human fineness to the bones that she had slowly grown accustomed to these past six months. Indeed, looking in a mirror last night, it had been her own face she had found strange, and looking now she wondered how they saw her. Did they find her nose and mouth too thick and coarse, her cheekbones much too heavy, too *pronounced*, in her face?

Beyond the gate the crowds thinned out. This was a richer district, the citizens who stood outside their doors dressed opulently now, their

curiosity if anything much fiercer than the people of the lower city. And the path, too, was suddenly much broader. A marble path, worn by a million feet to a melted smoothness, winding its way between huge roofless houses that were as different from one another as the houses of the lower city were similar.

Anna noted those differences and nodded inwardly. So it was with societies. For the poor uniformity, of dress and housing, for the rich…well, *anything*. So her father had pointed out to her years ago when she was still a child, his disillusionment with empires at its darkest ebb.

And today she would face the might of this small empire head on. It was a daunting thought, yet the days alone in her cell on the island had prepared her well for this. They could do their worst and she would still be herself, unbroken and unrepentant. For what *should* she repent, except that she lost her way? No, it was as her father had always taught her: If she believed in herself then it did not matter what the greater world thought of her. If she could square her conscience with herself then all was well.

And, thinking that, she heard his voice clearly for the first time in long months, encouraging her; saying what he had always said to her:

Be brave, Anna, but before all, be true to yourself.

She would not flinch away from what lay ahead. Whatever was said, whatever they decided, she would bear herself with pride, no matter what.

A welcoming party of senior guild officials waited before the next gate, a massive pile of stone with flanking guard towers and huge, twenty-foot doors.

Anna recognized few of them, but the three who stood at the front of the party were well known to her by now.

“Step down, Ah-na,” Lord Eneah said, approaching the palanquin and putting out a hand to her courteously, “you must walk from here on.”

She let herself be helped down, then stepped between the elderly Gihran and his fellow guildsman, Jimel. Now that she had to trust to her own legs she felt suddenly less confident. Her pulse had noticeably quickened; her heart fluttered briefly in her chest. They were almost there now. She sensed it.

Beyond the gate the street opened out into a square, the ground tilted steeply, as everywhere here in D’ni. Anna looked about her, realizing

that she had seen this open space from her cell window many times but never understood its significance—until now.

The Guild House lay ahead of her now, a massive building fronted by huge, six-sided basalt pillars, its massive, tiered roof reaching up toward the ceiling of the great cavern. Standing before it she did not need to be told what it was, for the shields of the different guilds betrayed its function. Guildsmen crowded the covered paths surrounding the great square, young and old, all of them wearing the various-colored cloaks—burgundy, yellow, turquoise, crimson, emerald green, black, pale cream, and royal blue—of the guilds.

As Lord Eneah came alongside, she glanced at the old man, noting how hard and expressionless his face was. Yet she knew him now to be fair if not kind. If anyone would save her, it was he. Master Gihran, she knew, did not like her, and Master Jimel had as good as told her that he thought she should be locked away for good. Only Master Haemis had been kind, and he had been replaced.

At a gesture from Lord Eneah, the party walked on, Anna in their midst.

At least they have not shackled me again.

But then, why should they? What would she have done? Run away? No. For there was nowhere to run to. She stood out, like a goat in a sheep pen.

As they came to the great marble steps that led up into the hall, Gihran leaned close and whispered to her:

“You must keep absolutely silent, unless you are directly requested to speak, you understand, Ah-na? If you speak out of turn, Lord Eneah will order you gagged.”

Anna turned, astonished, to look at him, but the old man merely nodded.

“Our codes of behavior must not be flouted,” he continued, his words almost inaudible as they began to climb the steps. “You must do precisely what you are told, and you must answer every question as it is put. All right?”

Anna nodded, but she suddenly felt anything but all right. The tension that had been in her stomach all the while now threatened to unnerve her. She fought against it; fought against the instinct to let her knees buckle and her head go down.

Her throat was dry now. Her hands trembled.

She stopped dead, straightening her head and clenched her fists into tight balls, controlling the nervous spasm. It was only a hearing, after all, not a trial. She would speak clearly and answer every point, exactly as Master Gihran said. And maybe they would see that she was telling them the truth. For why should she lie?

The Great hall was huge, much bigger than she would have guessed from the outside of the building. A series of steps followed the contours of the walls, at the top of which was a broad marble plinth. On the plinth was a line of massive basalt thrones. Cloaked guildsmen, more than a hundred in number, sat in those great chairs, thick golden chains of office hung about their necks.

There were only two breaks in that great square of thrones: the entrance she had come through and a second door set deep into the rock on the far side of the hall. Lord Eneah led the party on, across that great mosaic floor, then stopped, turning to face Anna.

“You will stand there, Ah’na,” he said commandingly.

She nodded, then watched the old man walk across and take his place on the great throne facing her. Tense now, she looked about her. Most of the seated guildsmen were old—graybeards like Lord Eneah, if not as ancient—but one or two seemed young by D’ni standards. Two in particular caught her eye. They sat side by side, just to the left of Lord Eneah, the first’s black cloak trimmed in bright red, the second’s in a pale blue.

She glanced at their faces, expecting to see there the same indifference that was on Lord Eneah’s features, then looked again, surprised to see how intently each of them looked at her: one curious and one with clear hostility.

Seeing that look, Anna shivered, her blood suddenly cold. There was no mistaking it; whoever he was, the young guildsman clearly hated her.

But why?

“Ah-na!” Lord Eneah said, his voice booming in that great space between the pillars.

“Yes, my Lord.”

“You know why you are here?”

She spoke out clearly, letting her voice fill with a confidence she did not entirely feel. “To answer questions, Lord Eneah.”

“Good. But you will keep to the point. You will not stray from the question you are asked. You understand?”

“I understand, my Lord.”

“Good. Then let us begin. We have many questions to get through before we have finished here today.”

§

As she climbed up into the sedan and pulled the curtain across, Anna felt a great weariness descend on her. For almost five hours she had stood there, without a break, answering their questions.

She sat down heavily in the cushioned seat, remembering.

Who was she? Where was she born? Who were her parents? What did her father do? To whom did he make his reports? What was Tadjinar like? What form of government did it have? Were there wars where she came from? Did they have machines? What power sources did they use? Were the men of her race honest?

Some of the questions were easy to answer. Others, like the last, were far more difficult. *Were* men honest? Some, like her father, were. But what of the traders in Jaarnindu Market? What of the inspectors and middlemen who worked for Lord Amanjira? She could hardly claim that *they* were honest. But the guildsman seemed to want a single answer to the question.

It was the young Guild Master, the one who had glared at her at the outset, who had been so insistent on this matter.

“Well, girl? *Are* all men honest?”

“No, my Lord. Not all men are honest.”

“Then men are dishonest by nature?”

“Not all men.”

“Come. You cannot have it both ways. Either they are—by nature—or they are not. Which is it?”

“Are all men in D’ni honest by nature, my Lord?”

There had been a sudden tension in the chamber. Lord Eneah stood, seeming suddenly a figure of great power.

“You are here to answer questions, not pose them.”

She had bowed her head, and Lord Eneah, glaring at her, had signaled to his fellow Lords, ending the session. But there was to be another, tomorrow, and a further one if necessary—until she was bled dry of answers.

Anna slumped back against the cushion and closed her eyes as the sedan lifted and began its gentle rocking motion.

With her eyes closed she could see the young man vividly. Veovis, his name had been. He was a handsome, princely man, yet she had noted just how closely he had watched her throughout, the light of suspicion in his eyes at all times.

The other, who sat beside him, had often leaned toward Veovis, to catch a whispered word and sometimes nod. He seemed an ally of Veovis’s, yet his eyes had never once held even the smallest hint of criticism of her. Nor had he asked a single question.

How strange, she thought, seeing his face clearly. A long, severe-looking face; not unattractive, yet not as obviously handsome as Veovis’s. He seemed a studious type. But then, weren’t all the D’ni studious?

The movement of the carriage lulled her. For a moment she dozed, then woke again, not knowing for an instant where she was.

Remembering, she found herself for the first time wondering just what use they would make of the answers she had given. She had seen the tunnels to the surface, and knew they were interested in what went on up there, but she could not make out just what they planned to do with the information she had given them. Some things seemed to have interested them more than others. For instance, they had seemed extremely interested in her answer as to whether her people were warlike or not. Did that mean they planned, perhaps, to invade the surface? Was that why the tunnels were there?

More to the point, did she really care? Lord Amanjira aside, she did not feel close to anyone in Tadjinar—no, nor in the entire empire. Those she had loved were dead. So did it matter?

Of course it matters, the voice inside her answered. The weight of your words could determine the fate of empires. Besides, war of any kind is bad. Think of the suffering, Anna.

The thought of it troubled her. Ought she, perhaps, to refuse to say anything more? Or had she said too much already?

The trouble was, she knew so little about these people. Whereas she had answered every question, they had taken great care to keep as much as possible from her. As if she were a spy.

Anna let out a long, sighing breath. Was that what they thought? That she had come to spy on them?

Were it not so serious a matter, she might have laughed. A spy! Why, the idea of it!

Yet even as she thought of it, she recalled the hostility in the young guildsman's face and wondered whether that might not be the cause.

They think I threaten them.

The thought was sobering. And suddenly, for the first time since those early days on Irrat, Anna began to wonder if her life was not possibly in danger.

§

"Well?" Lord Eneah asked later that evening when the Five were finally alone together. "Do you still think she is a threat, Nehir?"

Nehir, who had just taken a seat on the far side of the desk to Eneah, looked up, his pale eyes challenging.

"Not her, Eneah, but what she says. Personally, I think we have heard enough."

"I agree," Rakeri said, leaning forward in his chair. "What she is in herself does not concern us here; it is the threat that contact with her people might entail."

"You feel there is a genuine threat, then?"

Rakeri met Eneah's eyes and gave a single nod. "As you know, I did not agree with Veovis at first, but I feel my son's views have been fully vindicated. If what the girl says is true—and I believe it is—then the surface-dwellers are a backward, warlike, immoral race, whose every action is motivated by greed."

"You read that much into her words?"

"I did indeed. Why, her every utterance spoke of a deep corruption in their natures!"

"I agree," R'hira said quietly, speaking from his seat in the corner of the room. "I think we need hear no more. It would be folly even to think

of establishing contact with the outsiders."

"And you, Sajka?"

Sajka, the most recently appointed of the Five, simply nodded.

"Then, so we shall propose." Eneah looked about him. "I shall summon the full Council to session tomorrow at tenth bell. There is, however, one small matter that still needs to be settled, and that is what to do with the girl."

"Send her back," Rakeri suggested.

"Far too risky," R'hira countered. "It is unlikely, I admit, but someone might believe her tale and come looking for us."

"Then maybe we should place her on a Prison Age," Nehir said. "It need not be a harsh one. Somewhere pleasant, possibly. We could even make a new one for her, if need be."

"Pleasant or otherwise, do you think that would be just reward for her honesty with us, Nehir?" Eneah's eyes went from one to another of their faces, silently questioning each in turn, then he nodded.

"So it is. The girl will stay here, in D'ni. We shall find a home for her, temporarily, until it is decided fully. Agreed?"

"Agreed."

"Agreed."

"Agreed."

Sajka, who had not spoken until then, looked about him, a wintry smile on his thin lips, and nodded. "Agreed."

§

Veovis was ecstatic. That evening he threw a celebratory party at an inn down by the harbor. Aitrus, who had never found time to visit such places, tried hard to make his excuses, but Veovis would have none of it.

And so Aitrus found himself wedged into a corner of a huge dining room packed with busy tables, while all about him a dozen young guildsmen—some familiar to him, others only "faces"—dipped their goblets into the great central vat that rested at the table's center and drank to the young Lord's success.

"It was that final question that did it," Suahrnir said, his face glowing with excitement. "After that, it was a mere formality."

“Maybe so,” Veovis said, standing up and looking to Aitrus across the table, “but let me say one thing that has not been said. I was wrong about he girl.”

“Wrong?” several voices said as one.

Veovis raised his hands, palms out. “Hear me out, gentlemen! Before the hearing I was quite clear in my mind what kind of creature she would prove to be, and if you recall I was not hesitant in saying so!”

There was laughter at that and a great deal of nodding.

“However,” Veovis went on, “I *was* wrong, and I am not too proud to admit it. Whatever the merits or otherwise of her race, the girl spoke well. Yes, and honestly, I warrant. I think we all sensed that.”

There was a murmur of agreement and more nodding of heads.

“Word is,” Veovis continued, “that she is to stay in D’ni. Now, whether that is for the common good or not remains to be seen, but so our Masters have decided, and I feel we should, this once, wait and see. That said, we must remain vigilant.”

“What do you mean?” Veovis’s constant companion, Lianis, asked from where he sat to the left of the young Lord.

“I mean we ought not to let the girl become a focus for any movement to reverse today’s decision. No contact ought to mean exactly that. No contact.”

“And if she proves such a focus, Veovis?” Suhrnir asked.

Veovis smiled and looked about him confidently. “Then we should act to have her removed from D’ni to some more suitable place.”

Aitrus, who had been listening closely, frowned. A Prison Age, that was what Veovis meant. Yet he could not deny that his friend was being as fair as he could be, considering his views.

Aitrus reached out and took his goblet, cradling it to his chest. He was pleased that Veovis was so happy, yet he could not share their jubilation at today’s decision. Perhaps it was as Veovis said, that he was letting sentiment cloud his better judgment, but part of him was still back there in the rock, making his way up to the surface, with Master Telanis and Jerahl and all the others who had gone on that youthful venture. Whatever he had become these past thirty years, he could not shed that earlier self.

Watching the girl speak, it had finally crystallized in him. He knew now that he wanted contact: wanted, more than anything, to stand up there

and see, with his own eyes, what the surface was like.

But how could he say that to Veovis and remain his friend? For to Veovis the very idea of it was anathema.

“Guild Master Aitrus?”

The voice cut through the general babble of voices at the table. Aitrus looked up, expecting it to be one of the young guildsmen, then saw, just behind Lianis, a cloaked guildsman from the Guild of Messengers.

Silence fell around the table, Aitrus set down his goblet, then stood. “What is it?” he asked.

“An urgent message, Master,” the Messenger answered, drawing off one of his gloves, then taking a sealed letter from his tunic pocket. “I was told to ensure that you act upon its contents immediately.”

With a smile, Veovis put out a hand. “Here. I’ll hand it to my friend.”

The Messenger looked to Aitrus, who nodded. With a small bow to Veovis, he handed the letter to him, then stood back, pulling on his glove again.

Veovis turned back, then handed the letter across. “Urgent business, eh, old friend? That looks like Lord Eneah’s seal.”

Aitrus stared at the envelope a moment. Veovis was right. It was Lord Eneah’s seal. But when he opened it, the note was not from Lord Eneah, but from his father.

He looked up. “Forgive me, Veovis, but I must leave at once.”

“Is there trouble?” Veovis asked, genuinely concerned.

Aitrus swallowed. “It does not say.”

“Then go,” Veovis said, signaling to the others about the table to make way. “Go at once. But let me know, all right? If there is anything I can do…”

Aitrus, squeezing past his fellow guildsmen, gave a distracted nod. Then he was gone.

Veovis sat, staring across the crowded room, his face briefly clouded. Then, looking back at the others about the table, he smiled and raised his goblet. “To D’ni!” he exclaimed.

A dozen voices answered him robustly. *“To D’ni!”*

§

Kahlis stood in the entrance hall, pacing up and down, awaiting his son. It was midnight and the city bell was sounding across the lake.

As the last chime echoed into silence, he heard the outer gate creak back and hurried footsteps on the stone flags outside. A shadow fell across the colored glass of the door panels.

Kahlis stepped across and drew the bolt, pulling the door open.

Aitrus stood there, wide-eyed and breathless. From the look of him he had run the last half mile.

"What's happened?" he said, looking past his father.

Kahlis closed the door. "Come upstairs, Aitrus."

They went up, into his study. Closing the door quietly, Kahlis turned to him.

"I have been asked to look after the outsider for a time. Lord Eneah summoned me this evening and asked me if I would take the girl, Ah-na, into my household, as a temporary measure. Until better arrangements can be made. He asked me because he understood my concern for the young woman."

"And you want me to agree to this?"

"Yes."

"Then I agree."

Kahlis went to speak again, then realized what his son had said. "You agree?"

"I take it Mother has agreed. And you must have, else you would not be asking me."

In answer Kahlis went over to the door and opened it, then called down the steps. "Tasera!"

His mother's head and shoulders appeared at the foot of the stairs.

"Tasera," Kahlis said, "bring the young lady. I wish to introduce her to our son."

§

As she stepped into the book-filled study, Anna looked about her warily.

“Aitrus,” Kahlis said, “this is Ah-na. She is to be our house guest for a time.”

Aitrus bowed his head respectfully. “I am glad you will be staying with us.”

“Thank you,” she said, their eyes meeting briefly as he lifted his head again. “I am grateful for your kindness in letting me stay.”

“You are welcome,” Tasera interrupted, coming across to take Anna’s arm. “Now if you would excuse us, I must see Anna to her room.”

The brevity of the welcome surprised her; yet she turned and followed the woman out and down the corridor.

“Here,” Tasera said, opening a door and putting out an arm. “This will be your room.”

Anna stepped inside, surprised. Compared to the Lodge, it was luxurious. Anna turned and bowed her head.

“You are too kind, Tasera. Much too kind.”

§

Aitrus was walking across the open space between the main Guild House and the Great Library when Veovis stepped from a group of guildsmen and made to intercept him. It was more than a week since they had last met, in the inn beside the harbor.

“Aitrus! Did you get my note?”

Aitrus stopped. “Your note…Ah, yes. I have been busy.”

Veovis smiled, putting out his hands to Aitrus who took them in a firm grip.

“So what is she like?”

“She seems…polite. Well mannered.”

“Seems?”

Aitrus found himself oddly defensive. “It’s my impression.”

“Then you think she is genuine?”

“Didn’t *you?* I thought you said as much?”

Veovis smiled, defusing the situation. “That was *my* impression, I grant you. But then, I am not living with her—day in, day out. If there are any cracks in that mask of hers, you would see them, no?”

“If there were.”

“Oh, I am not saying that there *are*. It’s just…”

“Just what?”

“Just that we ought to be totally certain, don’t you think?”

For some reason the idea of checking up on the girl offended Aitrus.

“She seems…unsettled,” he said, after a moment, wanting to give Veovis something.

“Unsettled? How?”

“Maybe it is just the strangeness of everything here. It must be hard to adapt to D’ni after living under an open sky.”

“Does she miss her home?”

“I am not sure. To be honest, I have not asked her.”

Veovis laughed. “What you really mean is that you have not spoken to her yet.”

“As I said, I have been busy. Helping my father, mainly.”

Veovis stared at Aitrus a moment, then reached out and held his arm. “You should take a break some time, Aitrus. And when you do, come and visit me, on K’veer. And bring the girl.”

“That would be nice.”

“Soon, then,” Veovis said, and without another word, he turned and walked away.

Aitrus watched Veovis a moment—saw him return to the group he had left earlier, greeting them again, at ease among them—then smiled to himself as he walked away. To be honest, he had dreaded meeting Veovis again, knowing how Veovis felt about the “outsider.” He had thought, perhaps, that his friend would be angry that the girl was staying with his family, but his fears, it seemed, had been illusory.

His smile broadened as he hastened his pace, knowing he was late now for his meeting.

K’veer. It would be nice to take the girl to see K’veer.

§

The room was a workroom or lab of some kind. Anna hesitated, looking behind her at the empty corridor, then slipped inside, pulling the door closed.

You should not be in here, Anna, she told herself, yet that old familiar compulsion to explore was on her. Besides, she would not stay long, and she would not disturb anything.

There was a long, stone-topped bench along the left-hand side of the room, a big low table in the middle, complete with sinks and gas taps. On the far wall a number of small shelves held all manner of jars and bottles. To the right of the room, in the far corner, was a desk and a chair, and on the wall above a set of shelves on which were many notebooks.

She put her hand out, touching the cool, hard surface of the bench. It had been scrubbed clean and when she lifted her hand, she could smell a strange scent to it. What was that? Coal tar? Iodine?

Slowly she walked about the room, picking things up then placing them back. Most of the equipment was familiar, yet there were one or two things that were strange to her. One in particular caught her attention. It was a small bronze jar with eight lips, beneath each of which was a tiny bowl. A bronze ball sat on a tiny stand at the very center of the jar, balanced above all else.

Anna crouched down onto its level, staring at it for a time, then walked on, over to the far corner of the room.

Only two things were on the surface of the desk; an elaborately decorated inkstand made of fine blue jade and, just beside the stand, a pair of glasses.

Anna picked them up and studied them. The lenses were thick and seemed to be constructed of several very fine layers that acted as light filters of some kind. About each of the lenses was a tight band of expandable material which, in turn, was surrounded by a thick leather band, studded with tiny metal controls. She adjusted them, noting how they changed the opacity of the lenses, and smiled to herself. Then, on a whim, she tried them on. Strange. They were very tight. Airtight, probably, on the person for whom they were designed. And, wearing them, it became very dark.

Again she adjusted the controls, varying the light.

Taking them off, she set them down again, wondering what precisely they were used for. Mining? To protect the eyes against chips of rock? But if so, then why the varying opacity?

Anna half-turned toward the door, listening for a moment, then, turning back to face the shelves, she reached up and took one of the

journals down. Inside the pages were filled with strange writing, totally unlike any script she had ever seen before. Flicking through a few pages she stopped, staring in admiration at a diagram on the right-hand page. There were more farther on, all of them intricately drawn, the lines fine yet dark, the shading subtle. They spoke of a highly organized mind.

She closed the journal and set it back in its place, then, with a final look about her, hurried from the room.

It was no good. She would have to do something or she would die of boredom.

Distracted, she almost bowled into Aitrus.

"Come," he said quietly. "We need to speak."

Anna followed him, surprised. He had barely said a word to her all week. She was even more surprised when he led her along the corridor and into the workroom she had been exploring.

Did he know? Was that what this was about?

Inside, Aitrus closed the door, then gestured for her to take the chair beside the desk. He seemed awkward.

"Here," he said, turning to reach up and take down one of the books that were on the topmost shelf. He offered it to her. "That is a history of D'ni. It is a child's book, of course, but…"

Aitrus stopped. She was staring at the pages blankly.

"What is it?"

She looked up at him, then, closing the book, handed it back to him. "I cannot read this."

"But I thought…" He shook his head, then, "You mean, you learned to *speak* D'ni, but not to read it?"

Anna nodded.

Aitrus stared at the book a moment, then set it down and turned, searching among the bottom shelves until he found something. It was a big, square-covered book with a dark amber leather cover. He pulled it out from among the other books; turning, he offered it to Anna.

"Here. This is the key to all."

Anna took it, studying the beautifully tooled leather cover a moment before opening it. Inside, on heavy vellum pages, were set out columns of beautifully intricate figures—more like designs than letters.

She looked up at him and smiled. "Is this what I think it is? Is this the D'ni lexicon?"

“The *Rehevkor*,” he said, nodding.

She looked back at the page, smiling sadly now. “But I do not know what they mean.”

“Then I shall teach you,” Aitrus said, his pale eyes watching her seriously.

“Are you sure that is allowed?”

“No,” he answered, “but I will teach you anyway.”

§

Anna sat at the prow of the boat as it approached the island, Aitrus just behind her, standing, his right hand resting lightly on the rail.

“So that is K’veer,” she said quietly. “I saw it once before, when they brought me from Irrat.”

Aitrus nodded. “It has been their family home for many years.”

“I remember thinking how strange it was. Like a great drill bit poking up from the bottom of the lake.”

He smiled at that.

“So who is this Veovis?”

“He is the son of Lord Rakeri, Grand Master of the Guild of Miners.”

“And he, too, in a Miner?”

“No. Veovis is a Master of the Guild of Writers.”

“You have a Guild of Writers? Are they important?”

“Oh, very much so. Perhaps the most important of all our guilds.”

“Writers?”

He did not answer her.

She looked back at him surprised. Slowly the island grew, dominating the view ahead of them.

“Has Veovis many brothers and sisters?”

“None. He is an only child.”

“Then why so huge a mansion?”

“Lord Rakeri often entertains guests. Or did before his illness.”

Anna was quiet for a time as they drifted slowly toward the island. There was a small harbor directly ahead of them now, and beneath a long, stone jetty, a dark, rectangular opening.

“Does your friend Veovis dislike me?”

The question surprised Aitrus. “Why do you ask?”

“I ask because he stared at me throughout the hearing.”

“Is that so unusual? I stared.”

“Yes, but not as he did. He seemed hostile toward me. And his questions…”

“What of his questions?”

She shrugged, then, “Did he ask you to bring me?”

“He invited you specifically.”

“I see.”

Yet she seemed strangely distant, and Aitrus, watching her, wondered what was going on in her head. He wanted Veovis and her to be friends. It would be so easy if they were friends, but as it was he felt awkward.

“Veovis can be outspoken sometimes.”

“Outspoken?”

“I thought I ought to warn you that’s all. He can be a little blunt, even insensitive at times, but he is well meaning. You should not be afraid of him.”

Anna gave a little laugh. “I am not afraid, Aitrus. Not of Veovis, anyway.”

§

They spent hours, it seemed, just going from room to room in the great mansion that was built into the rock of K’veer, Veovis delighting in showing Anna every nook and cranny.

At first Anna had been wary, but as time went on she seemed to succumb to the young Lord’s natural charm, and Aitrus, looking on, found himself relaxing.

As they climbed the final flight of steps that led onto the veranda at the top of the island, Aitrus found himself wondering how he could ever have worried about these two not getting along.

“The stone seemed fused,” Anna was saying, as they came out through the low arch and into the open again. “It is almost as if it has been melted and then molded.”

“That is *precisely* what has happened,” Veovis answered her with an unfeigned enthusiasm. “It is a special D’ni process, the secret of which is known only to the guilds concerned.”

They stepped out, into the center of the veranda. There was a tiled roof overhead, but the view was open now on all four sides. All about them the lake stretched away, while in the distance they could see the great twisted rock of Ae’Gura and, to its right, the city.

They were high up here, but the great walls of the cavern stretched up far above them, while overhead there were faint clouds, like feathered cirrus. Anna laughed.

“What is it?” Veovis asked.

“It’s just that I keep thinking I am outside. Oh, the light is very different, but…well, it’s just so big.”

Veovis looked to Aitrus and smiled, then gestured toward a group of lounging chairs that rested at one end of the veranda.

“Shall we sit here for a while? I can have the servants bring us something.”

“That would be nice,” Anna said, looking to Aitrus and smiling.

As Veovis went to arrange refreshments, Anna and Aitrus sat.

“He’s very pleasant,” she said quietly. “I can understand why he is your friend.”

“So you’ve forgiven him?”

“Forgiven him?”

“For scowling at you.”

“Ah…” Anna laughed. “Long ago.”

Aitrus smiled. “I’m glad, you know.”

“Really?”

“Yes. I wanted you to be friends. It would have been hard otherwise.”

Anna frowned. “I didn’t know.”

“I…”

He fell silent. Veovis had returned. The young Lord came across and, taking the chair between them, looked from one to another.

His eyes settled on Anna. “Can I be honest with you, Ah-na?”

Anna looked up. “Honest? In what way?”

Veovus grinned. “We are alike, you and I. We are both straightforward people.” He looked pointedly at Aitrus. “*Blunt*, some call

it. But let me say this. I was not disposed to like you. Indeed, I was prepared to actively *dislike* you. But I must speak as I find, and I find that I like you very much."

She gave the smallest little nod. "Why, thank you, Lord Veovis."

"Oh, do not thank me, Ah'na. I did not *choose* to like you. But like you I do. And so we can be friends. But I must make one or two things clear. I am D'ni. And I am jealous of all things D'ni. We are a great and proud people. Remember that, Ah'na. Remember that at all times."

Anna stared at him a moment, surprised by that strange and sudden coldness in him, then answered him.

"And I, my Lord, am human, and proud of being so. Remember *that*," she smiled pointedly, "at all times."

Veovis sat back, his eyes studying Anna thoughtfully. Then, more cheerfully than before, he smiled and slapped his knees. "Well…let us forget such somber stuff. Aitrus…how go the plans for the new cavern?"

§

On the journey home Anna was silent, locked in private thoughts. Aitrus, sitting across from her, felt more than ever how alien their worlds were. What, after all, did they really know about each other?

"Ah-na?"

She looked up, a deep melancholy in her eyes. "Yes?"

"What would you like to do?"

Anna turned her head, staring out across the lake. "I'd like to understand it all, that's what. To know where all the food comes from. It mystifies me. It's like something's missing and I can't see what it is."

"And you want me to tell you what it is?"

She looked to him. "Yes, I do. I want to know what the secret is."

He smiled. "This evening," he said mysteriously, sitting back and folding his arms. "I'll take you there this evening."

§

Aitrus unlocked the door, then stood back.

"You want me to go inside?"

He nodded.

Anna shrugged. She had noticed the door before now. It had always been locked, and she had assumed it was a store cupboard of some kind. But inside it was a normal room, except that in the middle of the floor was a marble plinth, and on the plinth was an open book—a huge, leather-bound book.

Anna looked to Aitrus. "What is this room?"

Aitrus locked the door then turned to her again. "This is the Book Room."

"But there is only one book."

He nodded, then, with a seriousness she had not expected, said, "You must tell no one that you came here. Not even my mother and father. Do you understand?"

"Are we doing something wrong?"

"No. Yet it may be forbidden."

"Then perhaps…"

"No, Anna. If you are to live here, you must understand. You have too simple a view of who we are. It…*disfigures* your understanding of us."

Disfigures. It was a strange word to use. Anna stared at him, then shook her head. "You frighten me, Aitrus."

Aitrus stepped up to the plinth and stared down at the book fondly.

Anna stepped alongside him, looking down at the open pages. The left-hand page was blank, but on the right…

Anna gasped. "It's like a window."

"Yes," he said simply. "Now give me your hand."

§

Anna felt the surface of her palm tingle, then, with a sudden, sickening lurch, she felt herself drawn into the page. It grew even as she shrank, sucking her into the softly glowing image.

For a moment it was as if she were melting, fusing with the ink and paper, and then, with a suddenness that was shocking, she was herself again, in her own body.

Only she was no longer in the room.

The air was fresh and heavy with pollen. A faint breeze blew from the shelf of rock just in front of her. And beyond it…

Beyond it was a vividly blue sky.

Her mouth fell open in astonishment, even as Aitrus shimmered into solidity beside her.

He put his hand out, holding her arm as a wave of giddiness swept over her. She would have fallen but for him. Then it passed and she looked at him again, her words an awed whisper.

“Where are we?”

“Ko’ah,” he said. “This is my family’s Age.”

§

Anna stood on the top of the escarpment, looking out over a rich, verdant landscape that took her breath away, it was so beautiful. Flat, rolling pasture was broken here and there by tiny coppices, while close by the foot of the hill on which she stood, a broad, slow-moving river wound its way out across the plain, small grassy moundlike islands embedded like soft green jewels in its sunlit surface.

To her right a line of mountains marched into the distance, birds circling in the clear blue sky above them.

Sunlight beat down on her neck and shoulders; not the fierce, destructive heat of the desert but a far softer, more pleasant warmth.

“Well?” Aitrus asked, from where he sat, just behind her, staring out through the strange, heavy glasses that he now wore. “What do you think of Ko’ah?”

Anna turned, looking back at him. “I think you have enchanted me. Either that or I am still in bed and dreaming.”

Aitrus reached out and plucked a nearby flower, then handed it to her. She took the pale blue bud and lifted it to her nose, inhaling its rich, perfumed scent.

“Are your dreams as *real* as this?”

She laughed. “No.” Then, more seriously, “You said you would explain.”

Reaching into his pocket, Aitrus took out a small, leather-bound book. He stared at it a moment, then handed it to her.

"Is this another of those books?" she asked, opening it and seeing that it contained D'ni writing.

"It is. But different from the one we used to come here. This book links back to D'ni. It is kept here, in the small cave we went to.

"The words in that book describe the place to which we link back —the study in my family's mansion in D'ni. It was *written* there. Without it we would be trapped here."

"I see," she said, staring at the thin volume with new respect. "But where exactly are we? Are we in the pages of a book, or are we actually *somewhere?"*

His smile was for her quickness. "There is, perhaps, some way of calculating precisely where we are—by the night-time stars, maybe—but all that can be said for certain is that we are elsewhere. In all likelihood, we are on the other side of the universe from D'ni."

"Impossible."

"You could say that. But look about you, Anna. This world is the Age that is described in the book back in the room in D'ni. It conforms *precisely* to the details in that book. In an infinite universe, all things are possible—within physical limits, that is—and any book that *can* be written *does* physically exist. Somewhere. The book is the bridge between the words and the physical actuality. Word and world are linked by the special properties of the book."

"It sounds to me like magic."

Aitrus smiled. "Maybe. But we have long since stopped thinking of it as such. Writing such books is a difficult task. One cannot simply write whatever comes into one's head. There are strict rules and guidelines, and the learning of those rules is a long and arduous business."

"Ah," she said. "I understand now."

"Understand what?"

"What you said about Writers. I thought…" Anna laughed. "You know, Aitrus, I would never have guessed. Never in a thousand years. I thought you D'ni were a dour, inward-looking people. But this…well… you are true visionaries!"

Aitrus laughed.

“Why, the great cavern in D’ni is like a giant skull, filled with busy thoughts, and these books—well, they are like the dreams and visions that come from such intense mental activity!”

Aitrus stared at her a moment, then shook his head. “You are amazing, Ah-na. Why, I have lived in D’ni more than fifty years and never once have I thought of such a thing!”

“Different eyes,” she said, looking pointedly at him, “that’s all it is. Sometimes it takes a total stranger to see the obvious.”

“Perhaps so.”

“But tell me, Aitrus. You spoke of the book’s special properties. What exactly did you mean?”

He looked away. “Forgive me, Ah-na, but perhaps I have already said too much. Such things are great secrets. Grave and greatly guarded secrets, known to only the Guilds.”

“Like the Guild of Ink-Makers?”

Aitrus glanced at her, then smiled. “Yes, and the Guild of Books who manufacture the paper…and, of course, the Guild of Writers.”

“And the writing in the books…is it different from the writing you have been teaching me?”

“Yes.”

For a moment Anna stared at the book in her hands; then, closing it up, she handed it back to him.

She turned, looking about her once again, savoring the feel of the cool and gentle breeze on her arms and neck. Her hand went to her neck, drawing back the fine silk of her long, lustrously dark hair.

“It must have been cruel for you,” Aitrus said, watching her, a strange expression coming to his eyes, “being locked up.”

“It was.” She glanced around at him, then smiled—a bright smile, full of the day’s sunlight. “But let’s forget that now. Come, Aitrus. Let us go down to the river.”

§

That evening neither Aitrus nor Anna spoke a word about their visit to Ko’ah. But later, in her room, the impossibility of it struck Anna

forcibly. She sat on the edge of the bed, her mouth open in astonished recollection.

In that instant after she had "linked," she had never felt more scared. No, nor more exhilarated. And the world itself. *Ko'ah*. Sitting there, she could scarcely believe that she had really been there. It had seemed so strange and dreamlike. Yet in a small glass vase on the table at her side was the pale blue flower Aitrus had given her.

Anna leaned close, inhaling its scent.

It had been real. As real as this. The very existence of the flower was proof of it. But how could that be? How could simple words link to other places?

On their return from Ko'ah, Aitrus had shown her the Book, patiently taking her through page after page, and showing her how such an Age was "made." She had seen at once the differences between this archaic form and the ordinary written speech of D'ni, noting how it was not merely more elaborate but more specific: a language of precise yet subtle descriptive power. Yet seeing was one thing, believing another. Given all the evidence, her rational mind still fought against accepting it.

Beside the Book itself, Aitrus had gone on to show her the books of commentary—three in all, the last containing barely a dozen entries. All Books, he said, were accompanied by such commentaries, which were notes and observations on the Ages. Some of the more ancient Ages—like Nidur Gemat—had hundreds of books of commentary.

She had asked about it.

"Nidur Gemat?"

"It is one of six worlds belonging to Veovis's family."

"Ah, I see. And do all the D'ni own such Ages?"

"No. Only the older families own such Ages. The rest—the common people of D'ni—use the Book Rooms."

"You mean, there are common worlds, that everyone can visit?"

"Yes. In fact, until my father became Grand Master of our guild, we did not have our own Age. Ko'ah was written for my father twenty years ago."

"And before that?"

"We would visit the Guild Ages. Or Ages owned by friends."

Anna had smiled at that. "That is some incentive."

"Incentive?"

“To work hard and make one’s way in the guild. Is there no resentment among the common people?”

Aitrus had shrugged. “Not that I know of. The Common Ages are free to everyone. It is not as if they are denied.”

“No, but…” She had let the matter drop, returning her attention to the first of the books of commentary. “What is this?” she had asked after a moment, looking up at him, again.

There had been a stamped impression on the page, beneath a paragraph of small, neat writing in a bright green ink.

“That is an inspection. By the Guild of Maintainers. They ensure that all Ages are maintained according to Guild laws.”

“And if they are not?”

“Then the Book can be confiscated and the owner punished.”

“Does that happen often?”

“Not often. All know the penalty for misdemeanors. To own an Age is an immense responsibility. Few are trusted.”

“And yet you took me there.”

He had hesitated, then looking at her directly, he had nodded. “Yes, I did,” he said.

§

Anna slept well that night, and if she dreamed she did not recall it when she woke. Refreshed, she sat up, looking across at the delicate blue flower in its vase beside her bed, her mind at once filled with the wonder of what she had witnessed the day before.

Aitrus was not at breakfast, and at first she thought that maybe he had left early to go to the Guild Hall, but then, at the last moment, as she was finishing her meal, he rushed into the room in a state of immense excitement.

“Anna! Wonderful news! Veovis is to be given a *Korfah V’ja!”*

She stared at him uncomprehendingly.

He laughed. “I’m sorry. The Korfah V’ja is a special ceremony to mark the Guild’s acceptance of his Book—his first Master work, that is. It is a momentous event. Few guildsmen are ever given one, and Veovis is immensely young to have been granted such an honor!”

“And Veovis…he *wrote* this Book? Like the Age we went to?”

Aitrus nodded. “Only much better. Incomparably better.”

The thought of that made her reassess Lord Veovis. She had thought him merely a rich man’s son, a politician. She had not even considered that he was also a “creator,” let alone a great one.

“Then it will be a great occasion, no?”

“The greatest for many a year. All of D’ni society will be there. And you must come with us, Anna!”

She looked down. Usually she hated social occasions, but the thought of seeing all of D’ni society—and of meeting Lord Veovis once again—filled her with a strange excitement.

“When is it to be?” she asked, looking back at Aitrus.

“A week from now,” he answered. “On the anniversary of Kerath’s homecoming.”

§

It was a small ceremony. The six assistant grand masters and the Grand Master, Lord Sajka himself, stood in a half circle on the great platform, while the celebrant, Veovis, stood before them, his Book, the work of sixteen long years, on the podium before him.

The day was bright and springlike, the blue sky dotted with clouds. In the distance, snow-capped mountains marched toward the south and the great ocean. Below them the great plains stretched away to east and west and south, while to the north the ancient settlement of Derisa was tucked into a fold of hills.

This was the oldest of the guild’s many Ages—the Age of Yakul, made by the first great Writer of the Guild, Ar-tenen, and here, traditionally, the first official ceremony took place.

There would be a second, more public, ceremony later, on Veovis’s own world of Ader Jamat, at which this moment would be reenacted for all to see, but this seemingly low-key event was by far the more important.

Each of the seven senior members of the guild had read the great work that was today accepted into the guild’s own canon, and each had given their separate approval for this ultimate recognition of the young Guild Master’s talent. It was 187 years since the last Korfah V’ja and it

would be many years before another. Only ninety-three Books had been accepted into the canon in the whole of the long history of the guild—among them the Five Great Classics of D'ni—and only four guildsmen had ever received this honor younger than the man who now stood before them. Among those four was the legendary Ri'Neref.

A faint breeze gusted across the open space, rustling their cloaks, as Lord Sajka, Grand Master of the Guild of Writers, stepped forward and, in a tongue as distinct from the common speech of D'ni as that of the surface-dwellers, pronounced the Words of Binding.

And then it was done. As Veovis bowed his head to his peers, Lord Sajka smiled and, in the common speech, said:

"Well done, Veovis. We are all immensely proud of you."

Veovis looked up and smiled, conscious of the great honor being accorded him.

"My Lord, Guild Masters…I hope to prove worthy of your approval. It is a great privilege to be a member of the Guild of Writers, and I count myself blessed the day I chose to enter it."

And so it was done.

As, one by one, the elders linked back to D'ni, Veovis turned and looked about him at the ancient world of Yakul, and wondered if, one day, several thousand years hence, some other guildsman would stand on an Age he had written and wonder, as he now wondered, what kind of man it was whose imagination had wrought the connections to such a world as this.

He turned and walked over to the linking book. It was time to return to D'ni, to pause and reflect before beginning the next chapter in his life. For his next work would be something other, he was determined on it; not just a great work but a classic.

But before all, celebration. For today was his day. Today he became a great man, honored before all D'ni.

Veovis placed his hand against the glowing panel and linked, a smile appearing on his lips even as his figure shimmered and then faded into the air.

§

On the boat across to K'veer, Anna began to have second thoughts about meeting so many strangers at the ceremony.

With Aitrus it was fine, for it was only the two of them, as it had been with her father, but with all others, even with Aitrus's parents, she felt ill at ease. She was not by any means a social creature. How she should act and what she should say, these things were a complete mystery to her.

It does not matter, Aitrus had said to her. They do not expect you to behave as they behave.

Now, as the island grew nearer and she could see the great host of boats queuing to enter the tiny harbor, she felt her nervousness return.

Last night, before her conversation with Aitrus, there had been a strange little scene in Kahlis's study. Knowing that his father knew nothing of their ventures into Ko'ah, Aitrus had had his father "explain" about Books to Anna, and she, schooled by Aitrus in what to say and how to react, had pretended that it was all completely new to her.

Kahlis had clearly been concerned; not only at Anna's possible reaction but by the problem of just how *much* to tell her. Aitrus, however, had convinced him that had Lord Eneah not meant her to know, then he would have given explicit instructions to that effect. Kahlis would, indeed, have gone to see Lord Eneah had the great man not taken to his bed again with a recurrence of his illness.

And so Kahlis had "prepared" her, telling her that she must expect a great surprise, and that she was not to be afraid, for all that she would experience was quite normal. And she, prompted by Aitrus, had feigned that she understood, even though she would barely have recognized the process of "linking" from the description Aitrus's father had given her. It had been vague almost to the point of willfulness.

As their boat joined the great queue of boats, Anna could see, on the decks, endless guildsmen and their wives and sons and daughters, all of them dressed in their best finery. Looking at them, Anna felt her spirits sink again. She should never have come. Then her father's voice sounded clearly in her head.

Don't worry, Anna. Just be yourself.

§

It was almost an hour before their boat drew up alongside the stone jetty and they climbed the dark granite steps, up onto the marble-flagged forecourt. Facing them was the carved stone gate that surrounded the massive doorway.

Anna had seen K'veer by day and it had seemed a strange yet pleasant edifice, but at night it seemed a wholly forbidding place. As they approached the doorway, Aitrus came alongside her.

"Forgive me, Ah-na," he said quietly, "but we must conform to certain formalities. When we are inside, you will draw back and wait a moment while my father and I are greeted. Then it will be your turn."

Inside the great atrium, Anna did as she was told, holding back beside Tasera as Aitrus and his father stepped forward and were presented by the Chief Steward to Rakeri and his son.

Anna saw once more that curious taking of both hands that was the D'ni way of greeting, the fingers linked; witnessed the smiles, the easy banter between the two sets of men, and knew that this was a world she would never enter, book or no book.

As Kahlis turned, Tasera nudged her gently. "Ah-na."

Veovis was smiling pleasantly, his attention half on what was being said, half on greeting the next guests. As he looked across and his eyes met hers, the smile faded. There was a moment's consideration and then he turned to Kahlis.

"Forgive me, Master Kahlis, but might I have a word with you, in private?"

Kahlis looked to his son, then shrugged. "Of course, Veovis."

Veovis turned and bowed to Rakeri. "If you would forgive us a moment, Father? I shall not be long."

Tasera and Anna had stopped, yards distant of Lord Rakeri. As Veovis and Kahlis walked away, Aitrus stared after them, perturbed. Rakeri himself was simply mystified.

There was an embarrassed silence. Rakeri looked to Tasera and smiled weakly. Aitrus simply stared at the door through which Veovis and his father had passed. A moment later the two men returned, his father clearly embarrassed by something. Coming over to Aitrus, he drew him aside.

“It seems there has been a misunderstanding,” he began. “I took the invitation to include our house guest, Ah-na, but it was not meant so.”

Aitrus, who had been listening to his father’s words, glanced over at Veovis, who stood beside his father, wearing a determined look.

“A misunderstanding?” Aitrus tried to keep calm, tried not to let his anger show.

“Yes,” Kahlis said. “Ah-na can stay here, in the house. Veovis has promised that his servants will make sure she has everything she wants. But she cannot go through into Ader Jamat.”

“Why not?”

Kahlis raised a hand, bidding him be silent. “Because she is not D’ni.”

Aitrus felt the anger boil up inside him. Keeping his voice low, he leaned close to Kahlis. “This is not right, Father.”

“Maybe,” Kahlis conceded, “but it is Lord Veovis’s decision who enters his Age, not ours, and we must respect that.”

“I see.”

“I’m glad you do. Now will you tell her, Aitrus?”

Aitrus stared back at him a moment, then looked down. “You must forgive me, Father. I respect you deeply, and love you, but in this I must disobey you. This is wrong.”

“Aitrus…”

But Aitrus turned and walked across to where Rakeri and Veovis stood. “Forgive me, Lord Rakeri, but I have been suffering from an illness these past few weeks. It has left me feeling rather weak…light-headed.” He glanced at Veovis, who was watching him hawkishly now. “I feel it coming on now, and beg you to excuse me.”

Rakeri, who had no idea what was going on, gave a tiny bow of his head. “I commiserate, Aitrus, but maybe my house surgeon could help?”

“That is kind of you, my Lord, but I really ought to go home.”

Rakeri shook his head, a look of disappointment in his eyes. “I am sorry about that. I had hoped to talk with you.”

Aitrus bowed low, then turned to Veovis. “And may good fortune shine down on you, Veovis. I am sorry that I cannot be there for the celebration of your Korfah V’ja.”

There was a black anger now behind Veovis’s eyes, yet if he felt like saying something, he kept it well in check. He nodded curtly.

Aitrus stood there a moment longer, wondering whether something more ought to be said; then, knowing that the situation was irreparable, he turned on his heel and walked across to where Anna stood beside his mother.

“Aitrus,” Tasera said, her curiosity almost overwhelming her by now, “what is going on?”

“Ah-na and I are leaving,” he said, making no attempt to explain how things were. “Ask Father.”

Anna was staring at him now, bemused. “Aitrus? What’s happening?”

“Later,” he said, then took her arm and turned her, leading her out through the gathered ranks of guildsmen and their families, heading back toward the boat.

§

Aitrus was standing at the stern of the boat, chewing on a thumbnail and staring back at the great rock of K’veer as it slid into the darkened distance.

“You do not want to know.”

Anna, sitting just below him, let out an exasperated sigh. “I am not blind, Aitrus. I saw how Veovis looked at you.”

“There was a misunderstanding.”

Anna waited, conscious of how pained he was by all this. After a moment he spoke again.

“He said you were not invited.”

“Ah…I see.”

“He said it was because you were not D’ni.”

“That much is undeniable.”

Aitrus was silent a moment, then, “It was an impossible situation, Ah-na. He made me choose.”

“And you chose me?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because he was not right to make me choose.”

§

Anna was dressing the next morning when there was a hammering on the door downstairs. It was still very early and it was unusual for anyone to call at this hour. Going over to her door, she opened it a crack, listening.

There was a murmured exchange between Kahlis and his steward. Then:

“Here? Are you sure?”

There was silence for a moment, then:

“Lord Veovis! Welcome! To what do we owe this most pleasant surprise?”

“I have come to see your son, Master Kahlis. Is he at home?”

“He is. I shall go and see if he has risen. If you would take a seat, meanwhile. I’ll not be long.”

A hand briefly brushed her arm. She turned, her heart thumping, and found herself staring into Aitrus’s face.

“Aitrus!”

“Will you come down with me, Ah-na?”

She hesitated, then shook her head. “This is between you two.”

“No. This is about *you*, Ah-na. You ought to be there.”

§

Veovis stood as they stepped into the room.

“Aitrus,” he said, coming across the room, both hands extended. “Will you forgive me?”

Aitrus took his hands, tentatively at first, then with a greater firmness.

“That depends.”

“I understand. I handled things badly. I know that, and I am sorry for it.” He looked past Aitrus to where Anna stood. “And you, Ah-na. I owe you an apology, too.”

“You do, indeed,” Aitrus said sternly.

Veovis nodded, accepting the rebuke. “Yes. And that is why I have brought you a present. To try to make amends.”

He turned and, going back across, picked up a box and brought it back, handing it to Anna. It was a small, square box with tiny airholes in one side of it.

She stared at it a moment, then untied the bright red ribbon and lifted the lid…and then looked up at Veovis, laughing.

“Why, it’s beautiful! What is it?”

Carefully, cupping it in one hand, she lifted out a tiny creature—a veritable fur ball, its long silky coat the dark, brown-black of rich loam. Its large, cobalt-colored eyes stared up at her.

“It is a reekoo,” Veovis said. “It comes from Ader Jamat.”

Aitrus, who had turned to look, now smiled. “Thank you. It was a kind thought.”

Veovis sighed, then, somberly, “I am sorry you were not there last night, Aitrus.”

“And I. Yet we must resolve this matter, no?”

Anna, who was stroking the rippled, leathery neck of the tiny creature, looked up, glancing from one to the other. So it was not settled, even now.

Veovis took a long breath, then nodded. “Tonight,” he said. “Come to my rooms. We’ll talk about it then.”

§

It was very late when he came back that night. Anna waited up, listening as his footsteps came up the stairs. As he made to pass her room, she opened her door and stepped out.

“Aitrus?” she whispered.

Aitrus turned. He looked weary.

“Is everything all right now?”

He stared at her, then, “You had better come to my study, Ah-na. We need to talk.”

The words seemed ominous. Anna nodded, then followed him down the long corridor and into his room.

“Well?” she asked, as she took a chair, facing him.

Aitrus shrugged. “I am afraid Veovis is intractable.”

“Intractable? In what way? You are friends again, are you not?”

“Perhaps. But he will not bend on one important matter.”

“And that is?”

Aitrus looked down glumly. “He says that as you are not D’ni, he will not countenance you going into an Age, no, nor of learning *anything* about D’ni books. He claims it is not right.”

“Then you said nothing of our visit to Ko’ah?”

Aitrus hesitated, then shook his head.

“Can I ask why? It is unlike you to be so indirect.”

“Maybe. But I had no will to fight Veovis a second time.”

“So did you promise him anything?”

“No. I said only that I would consider what he said.”

“And was that enough for him?”

“For now.”

She stared at him a moment, then, “So what *have* you decided?”

His eyes met hers again. “Can I hide nothing from you, Ah-na?”

“No. But then you have had little practice in hiding what you feel from people, Aitrus.”

Aitrus stared at her for a long time, then sighed. “So you think I should abandon my plan?”

“Your plan?”

In answer, he opened the top right-hand drawer of his desk and took out a big, leather-bound book. It was a *book*—a D’ni book—she could see that at a glance. But when he opened it, there was no box on the front right-hand page, and the inside pages were blank.

She stared at it. “What is it?”

“It is a *Kortee-nea*,” he said. “A blank book, waiting to be written.”

Anna looked up, her mouth falling open slightly.

“I have had it for a year now,” he answered. “I have been making notes toward an Age. One I myself am writing. And I thought…well, I thought that perhaps you might like to help me. But now…”

She saw what he meant. There was a choice. Defy Veovis and lie about what they were doing, or go along with Veovis’s wishes and deny themselves this.

“And what do you want, Aitrus?” she asked quietly, her dark eyes probing his. “What do you *really* want?”

“I want to teach you everything,” he said. “Everything I know.”

§

In the months that followed, the relationship between Aitrus and Veovis was strained. As if both sensed that all was not well between them, they kept much to themselves. It was a situation that could not last long, however, and a chance remark to Veovis by a young man from the Guild of Maintainers brought things to a head once more.

Aitrus was in his rooms at the guild Hall, when Veovis burst in upon him unannounced.

“Is it true?” Veovis demanded, leaning across the desk.

Aitrus stared at his old friend in amazement. Veovis’s face was suffused with anger. The muscles stood out at his neck.

“Is *what* true?”

“The girl…the outsider…are you teaching her to Write? How could you, Aitrus! After all you promised!”

“I promised nothing, I said only that I would consider your words.”

”That’s pure sophistry, and you know it! You lied to me, Aitrus. You lied and deceived me. And not only me, but D’ni itself!”

“Now come,” Aitrus said, standing.

“You are a traitor, Aitrus! And you can be sure I shall be taking this matter before the Council!”

And with that Veovis turned and stormed from the room. Aitrus stood there a moment, half in shock, staring at the open doorway. Since the Maintainers inspection two weeks back he had feared this moment. Veovis wouldn’t go to the Council, surely? But he knew Veovis. His friend was not one to make idle threats.

§

Anna sat in the window of her room, the tiny reekoo asleep in her lap as she gazed out over the ancient city and the harbor far below.

They had come that morning—six uniformed guards from the Guild of Maintainers and the great Lord R'hira himself. Kahlis and Aitrus had greeted them at the door, then stood back as Guild Master Sijarun walked through and opened the door to the Book Room, removing both the Book of Ko'ah and the new, uncompleted book that had no name.

The decision of the Council had been unanimous—Kahlis and his son were given no voice in the matter. It had been ruled that there had been a serious breach of protocol. In future, no one who was not of D'ni blood would be allowed to see a Book or visit an Age. It was, Veovis had argued, important that they set a precedent. And so they had.

Anna sighed. It was all her fault. And now Aitrus was in despair. Even now he sat in his study, wrestling with the question of whether to resign his seat on the Council.

She had seen Kahlis's face, and Tasera's. To lose a Book, Aitrus had once told her, was a matter of the gravest importance, but to have one taken forcibly, by order of the Council, was far, far worse. And she had brought that upon them. She groaned softly.

There was no way she might make amends. No way, unless…

§

The old man looked across at Anna, staring at her through half-lidded eyes, then, pulling his cloak about him, he answered her.

"I do not know," he said, shaking his head sadly. "I really do not know. Even if we find something…"

"They will listen. They *have* to listen."

Kedri, Master of the Guild of Legislators, lifted his shoulders in a shrug. Then, with a sad smile, "All right. I shall try my best, young Ah-na. For you, and for my dear friend Aitrus."

He sat there for a long time after she had gone, staring straight ahead, as if in a trance. It was thus that his assistant, Haran, found him.

"Master? Are you all right?"

Kedri slowly lifted his head, his eyes focusing on the young man. "What? Oh, forgive me, Haran. I was far away. Remembering."

Haran smiled and bowed his head. "I just came to say that the new intake of cadets is here. A dozen keen young students, fresh from the

academy. What shall I do with them?”

Normally, Kedri would have found them some anodyne assignment—an exercise in dust-dry law, overseen by some bored assistant or other—but the arrival of this new intake coincided perfectly with his need.

If he *was* to search back through the records, he would need help—and what better help than a dozen keen young men, anxious to impress him? At the same time, he needed to be discreet. If word of his activities got back to the Council, who knew what fuss might ensue, particularly if young Lord Veovis got wind of it? By assigning these cadets to the Guild Age of Gadar—to search among the legal records stored in the Great Library there—he could split two rocks with a single blow, as the old saying went.

“Take them to the Book Room,” he said. “I’ll address them there. I have a task for them.”

Haran stared back at him a moment, surprised, then, recollecting himself, he bowed low and quickly hurried away.

It was strange that the girl, Ah-na, had come to him this morning, for only the evening before he had dreamt of the time he had spent with the Surveyors thirty years ago. It was then that he had first come to know young Aitrus. Aitrus had been assigned to him—to show him how things worked and answer his every query. They had got on well from the start and had been friends ever since.

As far as Ah-na was concerned, he had met her only once before, when Aitrus brought her to his house, but he had liked her instantly, and saw at once why Aitrus was fascinated by her. She had a sharp intelligence and an inquisitive mind that were the match of any guildsman. It had crossed his mind at once that, had she been D’ni, she would have made young Aitrus the perfect bride.

Even so, it surprised him still that she had come and not Aitrus, for he had half-expected Aitrus to pay him a call.

Kedri sat back, stretching his neck muscles and then turning his head from side to side, trying to relieve the tension he was feeling.

What he had agreed to do would not make him a popular man in certain circles, yet it had been a simple choice: to help his young friend Aitrus or abandon him.

Kedri sighed heavily. The Great Library of legislation on Gadar contained a mass of information stretching back over six thousand years—

the handwritten minutes of countless Council meetings and hearings, of guild committees and tribunals, not to speak of the endless shelves of private communications between Guild Masters. It would be like digging for one specific tiny crystal in the middle of a mountain.

And he had two weeks and a dozen keen young men to do it.

§

Lord Eneah sat at his desk. Aitrus's cloak of office lay folded on the desk before him. It had come that morning, along with that of Aitrus's father, Kahlis. Eneah had dealt with Kahlis, sending the cloak back to the Grand Master of the Surveyors. Whatever the rights or wrongs of the issue, Kahlis was clearly not to blame. But Aitrus's conduct was a different matter entirely.

It was fairly simple, really. Either he accepted Aitrus's resignation now and ended the rumors and speculation, or her left matters to the Guild of Surveyors, who, so he understood, had already instigated investigations into the conduct of their representative.

Whatever happened now, the damage was already done. The vote in Council had betrayed the mood of the guilds. In teaching the outsider D'ni, and in showing her an Age, Aitrus had not merely exceeded his brief, but had shown poor judgment. Some even claimed that he had been bewitched by the young girl and had lost his senses, but Eneah doubted that. Those who said that did not know Aitrus.

Yet Aitrus had been injudicious.

Eneah straightened slightly. He had not slept at all last night and every joint ached as if it had been dipped in hot oil, but that was not unusual. These days he lived in constant pain.

With a small, regretful sigh, he drew a sheet of paper to him and, taking a quill pen from the inkstand, quickly wrote an acceptance letter then signed his name. Once the remaining Lords had set their names to it, the letter would be sealed and incorporated into the public record. In the meantime, a notice would be posted throughout D'ni, advising the citizens of this news.

And so ended a promising career.

Eneah reached across and rang his summons bell. At once a secretary appeared at the door.

“Take this to Lord R’hira at once.

§

Anna stood before the three of them.

“So you wish to leave?” Kahlis asked.

“No,” she answered. “You have all been kind to me. Yet I feel I ought to. I have brought so much trouble to this household.”

“The choice was mine,” Aitrus said. “If anyone should leave, it should be me.”

“That would be wrong,” Anna said. “Besides, I shall be comfortable enough at Lord Eneah’s mansion.”

“Nonsense!” Tasera said, speaking for the first time since Anna had summoned them to this meeting. “I will not hear of it! Lord Eneah is an old man! No. You will stay here!”

Anna stared at Tasera, astonished. She had thought Tasera most of all would have wanted her gone. Since the Council’s meeting she had been practically ostracized. Yet Tasera seemed by far the most indignant of the three.

“Then it is settled,” Kahlis said, smiling proudly at his wife, “Ah-na stays here, as family.”

§

It was an ancient book, great whorls of faded color dotting the pale gray of its musty leather cover like dusty jewels. Looking down at it, Guild Master Kedri found himself smiling. Until yesterday it had remained unread upon its shelf for close on nineteen hundred years.

Kedri looked up at Anna, who sat to one side of the desk, then addressed the young man. “Forgive me, Guildsman, but how exactly did you find this? It is not as if this lay directly on the path of our main search.”

The young man bowed his head nervously, then spoke. “It was something you said, Master Kedri. Last night, at supper. You know, about trying to identify possible factors in the search.”

“Go on.”

“It got me thinking, Master, asking myself just what kind of person might be granted access to an Age. That is, what kind of non-D’ni person, naturally.”

“And?”

“Well…my first thought was that such a person would have to have the ear of someone important—someone very important, indeed, perhaps even one of the Five. And so I went to the list of clerks…”

“Clerks?”

“To the Five.”

“Ah…and what did that give you?”

The young man smiled. “Six names.”

Already Kedri was ahead of him. “Names that were not D’ni, I presume.”

“Yes, Master. There was a time when some of the more talented natives—from Guild Ages and the like—were permitted to come here, into D’ni itself.”

Kedri raised an eyebrow. “Now *that* I did not know.”

“No, Master, for it was a very long time ago, very shortly after the Council was first set up in its present form, not long after the Age of Kings.”

“I see. And these clerks…were they restricted to D’ni, or were they granted access to other Ages?”

The guildsman nodded at the book before Kedri. “I have marked the relevant passages, Master. I am sure there are further entries in the other books.”

There was a small pile of books on the floor behind the young guildsman.

Anna felt a tingle of excitement pass through her. She stood and, crouching, lifted one of the books and opened it, sniffing in the scent of great age as it wafted up to her off the page.

It was an old script, different in several ways from its modern counterpart, yet easily decipherable. In several places the ink had faded almost to nothing, yet the meaning of the text was quite clear.

Anna looked across at Kedri and nodded, a feeling of deep satisfaction flooding her at that moment.

"It is not too old then, Master?" the young guildsman asked. "I thought, perhaps, that its age might possibly invalidate it."

"A precedent is a precedent," Kedri said, looking to Anna, then reading the passage once again. "We shall find further sources to verify this, no doubt—and further instances, I warrant."

He closed the book, then nodded. "You have done well, guildsman."

"Thank you, Master," the young man answered, bowing low, a great beam of a smile on his face.

"Thank *you*, Guildsman…"

"Neferus, Master. Guildsman Neferus."

§

What had taken the full vote of the Council to decide, took but a single signature to revoke.

As Lord Eneah pushed the document away, he felt a great weight slip from him. He was glad Master Kedri had found what he had found, for he had never felt quite at ease with the decision, yet looking up, he saw in his mind the closed face of Lord Rakeri, and knew that all the Five were not as pleased as he.

The Books would be returned to Master Kahlis, and Ah-na would be free to travel in them. Yet all was not quite as it had been. Aitrus still refused to take up his vacated role as representative of the Guild of Surveyors. He said he had had enough of votes and meetings, and maybe he was right. And as for Veovis…

Eneah dropped the pen back into the inkstand and leaned back, weary now that it was all over.

Young Veovis had called on him earlier that day, determined to have his say. He had not been rude, nor had he challenged in any way the validity of Master Kedri's discoveries, yet it was clear that he resented the Legislator's intrusion in Council matters, and was dead set against allowing Ah-na entry into any D'ni Age. He had ended by begging Lord

Eneah to set the ancient precedent aside and endorse the Council's decision, but Eneah had told him he could not do that.

He law *was* the law, after all. Precedent was precedent. It was the D'ni way and had been for a thousand generations.

And so Veovis had left, under a cloud, angry and resentful, and who knew what trouble would come of that?

But so it is, Eneah thought, looking about him at the empty study. No single man, however great or powerful, is more important than D'ni.

He smiled, knowing that soon he would be little more than a name, another statue in the Great Hall of the Lords.

"So it is," he said quietly. "And so it must be. Until the end of time."

And with that he stood, walked across the room and out, moving slowly, silently, like a shadow on the rock.

PART FOUR: GEMEDET

Anna waited, crouched just in front of Aitrus in the narrow tunnel, looking out into the bottom of the well. Just below her, the surface of the tiny, circular pool was black. Slowly, very slowly, sunlight crept down the smooth, black wall facing her, a pure light, almost unreal it seemed so bright, each separate shaft a solid, shining bar in that penumbral darkness.

It was cool and silent, yet overhead, far above the surface, the sun approached its zenith.

"Wait…" Aitrus said softly. "Just a moment longer."

The sunlight touched the still, curved edge of the water. A moment later the water's depths were breached, the straight beam bent, refracted by the clear liquid.

Anna gasped. It was beautiful. The well had a solid wooden lid, but Aitrus had cut an intricate design into the wood. As the sun climbed directly above the well, so each part of that design was slowly etched upon the dark circle of the pool, until the whole of it could be seen, burning like shafts of brilliant fire in the cool, translucent depths of the water.

The D'ni word Shorah. *"Peace."*

Anna smiled and turned to look at Aitrus, seeing how the word was reflected in the black centers of his pupils.

“So that’s what you were doing,” she said quietly. “I wondered.”

She turned back, knowing, without needing to be told, that its beauty was transient, would be gone just as soon as the sun moved from its zenith and the sunlight climbed the wall again.

“I made it for you,” he said.

I know, she thought. Aloud, she said, “Thank you. It’s beautiful.”

“Isn’t it?”

They watched, together in the silence, until, with a final, glittering wink, the brightness in the pool was gone.

Anna stared into the blackness and sighed.

“What are you thinking?” he asked, after a moment.

“I was thinking of my father.”

“Ah…” He was silent a long while, then, “Come. Let’s go back up.”

Anna turned and followed, half-crouched as she walked along the tiny tunnel, then straightening to climb the twisting flight of steps that had been cut from the rock. Aitrus had worked weeks on this. And all for that one small instant of magic.

A tiny shiver passed through her. She watched him climb the steps ahead of her, noticing how neatly his hair was clipped at his neck, how strong his back and arms were, how broad his shoulders, and realized just how familiar he had become these last few years.

As familiar almost as this Age they had slowly built together.

Stepping out into the sunlight beside Aitrus, Anna smiled. It was so green. All she could see was green. Forest and grasslands, wood and plain. Why, even the slow, meandering rivers were green with trailing weed.

Only the sky was blue. A deep, water-heavy blue. In the distance a great raft of huge white clouds drifted slowly from right to left, their movement almost imperceptible, casting deep shadows on the hills and valleys below.

It had all seemed strange at first, after the desert landscape she had known all her life. So strange, that she had spent hours simply staring at the clouds, fascinated by them.

She looked to Aitrus. He was wearing his D’ni glasses now, to protect his eyes against the glare of the sun. They all wore them when not in D’ni. Only she did not have to.

“We should go north next,” she said. “To the mountains. I could map that area beyond the lake.”

Aitrus smiled. “Perhaps. Or maybe that long valley to the northeast of here.”

She looked down, smiling, knowing exactly why he was interested in that area. They had passed through it several weeks ago on their way back from the peninsula and had noticed signs of long-dormant volcanic activity. She had seen the tiny gleam of interest in his eyes.

“If you want.”

They walked on, talking as they went, continuing the discussion they had begun earlier that day. Wherever they went, they talked, making observations on the physical signs of this world, and debating which small changes to the words and phrasing might have caused this effect or that.

Sometimes Aitrus would stop, crouch down with the notepad balanced on his knee, and would write down something he or she had said, wanting to capture it, ready to enter it in the book of commentary they had begun six months back. Already they had filled half the great ledger with their observations, and each day they added to it, with words and maps and drawings.

A long slope of the falls was ever-present, a counterpoint to the exotic, echoing cries of birds from the wood that climbed the steep slope behind them. To the north were mountains, to the south the great ocean.

It was a beautiful place.

Aitrus’s tent was to the left of the camp, its long frame of green canvas blending with the background. A smaller, circular tent, its canvas a vivid yellow, stood just beside and was used for stores. Until a week ago there had been a third tent, the twin of Aitrus’s, but now that the cabin was habitable, Anna had moved in. It was not finished yet—Aitrus had yet to cut and fit the wooden floor—but the roof was on and it was dry. Beside Anna’s section, which was screened off, Aitrus had set up a temporary lab, which they planned to use until they had built a proper, permanent laboratory a little way farther up the slope.

They walked across. A trestle table stood just outside Aitrus’s tent, in the shadow of the canvas awning. On top of it, its corners held down by tiny copper weights, was the map Anna had been working on earlier, a clear thin cover of D’ni polymer laid over it in case of rain.

The map was remarkably detailed, a color key on the right-hand side of the sheet making sense of the intricate pattern of colors on the map itself. Areas of the sheet were blank, where they had not yet surveyed the land, but where they had, Anna had provided a vivid guide to it—one that not only made sense of its essential topography but also gave a clue to the types of soil and thus vegetation that overlay the deeper rock formations. It was all, she said, using one of her father's favorite terms, "a question of edaphology."

Maybe it was because she was from the surface, but her grasp of how the kind of rock affected the visible features of the land was far more refined than his almost instinctive. Often she did not have to analyze a rock sample but knew it by its feel, its color and its texture. His instinct was for the pressures and stresses within the rock that provided what one saw with its underlying structure.

At first it had astonished Aitrus that she had known so much of rocks and minerals and the complex art of mapping the rock, and even when he learned more of her father and how she had helped him, he was still amazed that she had grasped quite so much in so brief a time. Yet as the weeks went on, his surprise had turned to delight, knowing that here at last was someone with whom he might share his lifelong fascination with the rock.

It was not long before he had begun to teach her the D'ni names for the different types of rock and the terms his people used to describe the various geological processes. Anna learned easily and was soon fluent enough to hold those conversations which, through to today, had never ceased between them. After a while Aitrus had begun to push her, testing her, as if to find the limits of her intelligence, but it seemed there were no bounds to what she was capable of.

Right now, however, the two of them stood beside the trestle table. Aitrus studied the half-completed map a moment then tapped an area in the top left corner with his forefinger.

"We could start here, Ah-na, where the river bends and drops. It would give us the opportunity to map all of this area to the west of the river. That would take, what? Two days?"

Anna studied the blank area on her map and nodded. "Two. Three at most."

“Three it is. We could take the tent and camp there. Then we could spend a day or two exploring the valley. There are cave systems there. Did you see them?”

Anna smiled. “I saw.”

“Good. And once we’ve finished there, we could come back here and spend a couple of days writing things up.”

“Can the guild spare you that long?”

“If they need me urgently, they’ll send someone. But I doubt it. Things are slow at present, and until the Guild of Miners present their report on the new excavation, that is how it will remain. We might as well use the time fruitfully.”

“Aitrus?”

“Yes?”

“Can we set out a little later tomorrow? In the afternoon, perhaps?”

“You want to see the well again?”

Anna nodded.

“All right. I guess it will take most of the morning to pack what we need, anyway.”

She smiled. That was so like Aitrus. Rather than admit to indulging her, he would always find some excuse to let her have her way.

“And Aitrus?”

He turned, clearly distracted. “Yes?”

“Oh, nothing…Nothing important, anyway.”

§

That evening it rained; a warm, heavy rain that thundered on the roof of the cabin and filled the valley like a huge, shimmering mist of silver.

Anna stepped out into the downpour, raising her arms, her head back, savoring the feel of the rain against her skin.

Just across from her, Aitrus peeked out from his tent and, seeing what she was doing, called out to her.

“Ah-na! What are you doing? You’ll be soaked to the skin!”

Laughing, she turned to face him, then, on whim, began to dance, whirling around and around, her bare feet flying across the wet grass.

“Ah-na!”

She stopped, facing him, then put a hand out.

“Come, Aitrus! Join me!”

Aitrus hesitated, then, reluctantly, yet smiling all the same, he stepped out. Almost instantly he was soaked, his hair plastered to his head.

He took her hand.

“Come!” she said, her eyes shining brightly, excitedly, “let’s dance!” And without warning, she began to whirl him around and around beneath the open sky, the light from the hanging lanterns in front of the cabin turning the fall of rain into a cascade of silver.

Exhilarated, Aitrus whooped loudly, then stopped dead. He was laughing, his whole face alive as she had never seen it before.

“Isn’t it *wonderful?*” she asked, almost shouting against the noise of the downpour.

“Marvelous!” he shouted back, then, unexpectedly, he grabbed her close and whirled around and around again, until, giddy, from their circling, he stopped, swaying and coughing and laughing.

Anna, too, was laughing. She put her head back, drinking in the pure, clean water from the sky. Rain! The wonder of rain!

§

Anna stood behind the wooden partition, toweling her hair. Outside, the rain still fell, but now it could be heard only as a gentle, murmuring patter against the roof. Soon the storm would pass.

She had changed into a dry, woolen dress of cyan blue, her favorite color, fastened at the waist with a simple cord.

Folding the towel, she dropped it onto the end of her pallet bed then turned full circle, looking about her. There were books wherever she looked, on shelves and surfaces, and, on the narrow wooden table in the corner, scientific equipment, the polished brasswork gleaming in the lamplight.

Anna sighed, feeling a real contentment. For the first time in a long, long while, she was happy.

To be honest, she had never worked so hard, nor felt so good. Before Aitrus had asked her to work with him on the creation of this Age, she had felt useless, but now…

Now she had a problem.

Anna sat on the edge of her low bed, staring at the bare earth floor. Perhaps it was the dance. Perhaps it was that glimpse of Aitrus, happy just as she was happy. Was that an illusion? Was it a transient thing? Or could it last?

And besides…

There was a knock on the door of the cabin. Anna looked up, startled. It was Aitrus's habit to spend an hour at this time writing up his journal for the day.

"Come in."

Aitrus stepped inside, his right hand drawing his dark hair back from his brow.

"I wondered if you were all right."

She smiled up at him. "I'm fine. It was only rain."

Aitrus stood there a moment, hesitant, not sure just what to say, then: "Would you like a game of *Gemedet?*"

"All right."

He grinned, then nodded and turned away, returning to the tent to bring the grid. Smiling, Anna stood, then went across to clear a space on the table.

Gemedet, or six-in-a-line, was the most popular of D'ni games. She had seen a close variant of the game in Tadjinar, played by the Chinese merchants, but the D'ni version was played not on a two-dimensional board but on a complex three-dimensional grid, nine squares to a side.

It was, she thought, the perfect game for a race embedded in the rock, whose thinking was not lateral but spatial.

Aitrus returned a moment later, setting the grid down on the table. It was a beautiful thing, of hand-carved lilac jade, as delicate-looking as a honeycomb yet strong. Strong enough to have survived a thousand games without a single chip or blemish.

The base of the grid was a polished hemisphere of topaz on which the grid revolved smoothly. Long, silver tweezers, called *re'dantee*, were used to slip the playing pieces into place, while the pieces themselves were simple polished ovoids of green tourmaline and dark red almandine.

Both the re'dantee and the "stones" were kept in a velvet-lined box, which Aitrus now opened, placing it on the table beside the grid, so that both of them could easily reach it.

Anna smiled. She had fallen in love with the set at first sight.

They sat, facing each other across the table. As ever, Anna went first, slipping her first "stone" into place, deep in the heart of the grid, giving herself the maximum of options.

For an hour or more they played, in total silence, each concentrating on the pattern of the stones. After a while the patter of rain on the roof stopped. Night birds called in the darkness of the woods outside. Inside the game went on beneath the lantern's light.

Finally, she saw that she had lost. Aitrus had only to place a single stone in the bottom left-hand corner and there was no way she could stop him making six.

Anna looked up and saw, by his smile, that he knew.

"Another game?"

She shook her head. Was now the time to speak? To tell him what she had been thinking earlier?

"What is it?" he asked gently.

Anna looked down. "I'm tired, that's all."

"Are you sure?"

She gave a single nod. It had been a good day—an almost perfect day—why spoil it?

"Shall I pack the game away?" he asked, after a moment.

"No," she said, looking up at him and smiling; content now that she had decided. "I'll do that in the morning. Besides, I want to see how you managed to beat me."

Aitrus grinned. "Experience, that's all."

At that moment, there did not seem to be so many years' difference in their ages. In human terms, Aitrus was old—as old, almost, as her father—but in D'ni terms he was still a very young man. Why, it was quite likely that he would live another two centuries and more. But was that also why she was afraid to speak of what she felt?

"I'll leave you, then," he said, standing, the lamplight glinting in his fine, dark hair. "Good night. Sleep well, Ah-na."

"And you," she said, standing.

He smiled. And then he left, leaving her staring at the door, the words she wanted so much to say unsaid, while outside the night birds called, their cries echoing across the darkness of the valley.

§

The valley was a deep gash in the surrounding land, cut not by a river but by older, far more violent processes. Bare rock jutted from the slopes on either side, the folded pattern of its strata long exposed to the elements so that the softer rocks had been heavily eroded, leaving great shelves of harder rock. At one end of the valley, in the shadow of a particularly long shelf, were the caves. It was there that they began their survey.

Anna knew what Aitrus was looking for, and it was not long before he found it.

“Ah-na! Come here! Look!”

She went across to where Aitrus was crouched in the deep shadow of the overhang and looked.

“Well?” he said, looking up at her triumphantly.

It was old and worn, but there was no doubting what it was. It was the puckered mouth of a diatreme—a volcanic vent—formed long ago by high pressure gases drilling their way through the crustal rocks.

For the past two days they had kept coming upon signs that there was a volcano somewhere close by. Volcanic deposits had been scattered all about this area, but this was the first vent they had found.

From the look of it the volcano was an old one, dormant for many centuries.

“I thought we’d made a stable world.”

He smiled. “We did. But even stable worlds must be formed. Volcanoes are part of the growing process of an Age. Even the best of worlds must have them!”

“So where is it?” she asked.

He stood, then turned, pointing straight through the rock toward the north.

“There, I’d guess.”

“Do you want to go and look for it?”

Aitrus shrugged, then, “If you wouldn’t mind.”

Anna laughed. “Why should I? It’s a volcano. *Our* volcano. Our first!”

He grinned, as if he had not thought of that, then nodded. “Come then. If I’m right, it can’t be far.”

§

The caldera was still visible, but time and weather had worn it down. Trees covered its shallow slopes and filled the great bowl of the volcano, but here and there the thin covering of soil gave way to fissures and vents whose darkness hinted at great depths.

It was old. Far older than they had first thought. Not thousands, but millions of years old.

It was this part that Anna had taken a little while to grasp. The Ages to which they linked were not made by them, they already existed, for the making of worlds was a process that took not months but long millennia. Aitrus, trying to make things absolutely clear to her, and summed it up thus:

“These Ages are worlds that do exist, or have existed, or shall. Providing the descriptions fits, there is no limitation of time or space. The link is made regardless.”

And so, too, this world of theirs, their Age, which they had called Gemedet, after the game. It, too, existed, or had existed, or would. But where it was or when they did not know.

Not that it mattered most of the time, but on occasion she did wonder just where they were in the night sky, and when—whether at the beginning of the universe or somewhere near the end of that vast process.

The very thought of it humbled her, made her understand why her father had believed in a Maker who had fashioned it all. Having “written,” having seen the great skill and subtlety involved merely in creating a *link* to these worlds, she now found herself in awe of the infinite care that had gone into the making of the originals to which their templates linked.

Personally, she could not believe that blind process had made it all. It was, for her, quite inconceivable, bearing in mind the complexity and variety of life. Yet in this, if nothing else, Aitrus differed from her. His

was, or so he claimed, a more rational approach, more *scientific*—as if understanding the product of such processes were a key to understanding the why of them existing in the first place.

Aitrus had walked down the tree-strewn slope, making his way between the boulders, until he stood beside one of the larger vents. Resting his chest against the sloping wall of the vent, he leaned out, peering into the darkness. For a moment he was perfectly still, then he turned his head, looking back at her through his D'ni glasses.

"Shall we go in?"

Anna smiled. "All right, but we'll need to bring a rope from the camp."

Aitrus grinned. "And lamps, and…"

"…your notebook."

A look of perfect understanding passed between them. It was time to explore the volcano.

§

They got back to the encampment three days later than they had planned, to find that a message had been delivered from D'ni. It lay upon the map table in its dark blue waterproof wrapping.

While Anna began to stow away their equipment, Aitrus broke the seal of the package and took out the letter. He knew it was not urgent—they would have sent a Messenger into the Age to find him if it was—but it was unusual. Unfolding the letter, he squinted at it through the lenses of his glasses. It was from his old friend Kedri, and concerned a query Aitrus had put to him the last time they had met for supper.

He read it through quickly, then, smiling, he slipped the paper into his tunic pocket.

"Well?" Anna asked, coming alongside him. "Anything important?"

"No, but I need to go back."

"Should we pack?"

He shook his head. "No. I only need to be away an hour or two. I'll go later tonight. You can stay here. I'll come back as soon as I can."

Anna smiled. "You should have a bath when you get back to D'ni."

“A bath?” He looked mock-offended. “Are you saying I smell, Ti’ana?”

“You positively reek of sulphur!” she said, grinning now. “Like Old Beelzebub himself!”

He smiled at that. In the caves beneath the caldera, she had taught him much about the mythology and gods of the surface, including the demons whom, according to many religions, lived in the regions beneath the earth.

“If only they knew the reality of it,” she had said. “They’d be amazed.”

It was then that he had given her her new name—*Ti’ana*, which in D’ni meant “story-teller,” as well as punning on her surface name. “Do you need me to cook you something before you go?”

“I’d rather you helped me sort those samples.”

“All right,” she said, her smile broadening. “I’ll do the tests, you can write up the notes.”

§

Aitrus looked about him at the tent. All was neat and orderly. His notebook was open on the small table by his bed, the ink of the latest entry not yet dry. It was time to link back.

Anna was in her cabin. He would say goodnight to her, then go.

Aitrus went outside and stepped across to the cabin, knocking softly on the door. Usually she would call out to him, but this time there was nothing. Pushing the door open a little, he saw that she was not at her desk.

“Ti’ana?” he called softly. “Are you there?”

As if in answer he heard her soft snoring from behind the thin, wooden partition. Slipping inside, he tiptoed across and, drawing back the curtain, peered in.

Anna lay on her side on the pallet, facing him, her eyes closed, her features peaceful in sleep. The long journey back from the valley had clearly exhausted her. He crouched, watching her, drinking in the sight of her. She was so different from the women he had known all his life—those strong yet frail D’ni women with their pale skin and long faces.

It had been more than two months ago, when they had made their first, and as yet only, journey to the mountains north of the camp. On the way Anna had collected samples of various native flowers for later study. Yet, coming upon the wonder of a snow-covered slope—the first she had ever seen or touched or walked upon—she had taken the blooms from her pocket and scattered their petals over the snow. He had asked her what she was doing, and she had shrugged.

"I had to," she had said, staring at him. Then, pointing to the scattered petals, she had bid him look.

Aitrus closed his eyes, seeing them vividly, their bright shapes and colors starkly contrasted against the purity of the whiteness—like life and death.

It was then that he had decided, and every moment since had been but a confirmation of that decision—an affirmation of the feeling he had had at that moment, when, looking up from the petals, he had seen her face shining down at him like the sun itself.

Aitrus opened his eyes and saw that same face occluded now in sleep, like the sun behind clouds, yet beautiful still. The most beautiful he had ever seen. At first he had not thought so, but time had trained his eyes to see her differently. He *knew* her now.

Aitrus stretched out his hand, tracing the contours of that sleeping face in the air above it, a feeling of such tenderness pervading him that he found his hand trembling. He drew it back, surprised by the strength of what he felt at that moment. Overwhelming, it was, like the rush of water over a fall.

He nodded to himself, then stood. It was time to go back to D'ni. Time to face his father, Kahlis.

§

"I cannot say that I have not half-expected this," Kahlis was saying, "but I had hoped that you would, perhaps, have seen sense in time."

"I am sorry that you feel so, Father."

"Even if it is as you say, Aitrus, have you thought this through properly? Have you thought out the full implications of such a union? She

is an outsider. A surface-dweller. And you, Aitrus, are D'ni—a Guild Master and a member of the Council. Such a marriage is unheard of."

"Maybe so. Yet there is no legal impediment to it." Aitrus took the letter from his tunic pocket and placed it on the desk before his father. "I asked Master Kedri to look into the matter, and that is his expert opinion."

Kahlis took the sheet of paper and unfolded it. For a moment he was silent, reading it, then he looked up, his eyes narrowed.

"And the age difference, Aitrus? Have you considered that? Right now you are the elder, but it will not always be so. Your life span is thrice hers. When you are still in your prime she will be an old woman. Have you thought of that?"

"I have," he answered. "Yet not to have her—to have never had her by my side—that would be death indeed."

"And what if I said I was against the marriage?"

Aitrus merely stared at him.

Kahlis stood, then came around his desk.

"You will not accept my advice. But I shall give you my blessing. That, I hope, you *will* accept."

"Gladly!" Aitrus said, then, reaching out, he took his father's hands in the D'ni way. "You will be proud of her, Father, I promise you!"

§

Aitrus linked back into the cave above the encampment. Stepping out, he saw that nothing had changed. In the moonlight the camp looked peaceful, the tents to the left, the cabin to the right. Beyond and to the right the waterfall was like a sheet of silver, its constant noise lulling him.

Walking down between the trees he found that he was whistling softly, an old D'ni song his mother had once sung to him. He stopped, his eyes going to the cabin. There she slept. Ti'ana. His love.

"It cannot be wrong," he said quietly.

Aitrus felt a light touch on his shoulder and started. Turning, he found Anna standing there behind him. She was smiling, as if pleased by her little trick.

"What cannot be wrong?"

He swallowed. Now that the moment had come, he was afraid of it. Yet that fear was natural, it was there to be overcome.

"You and I," he answered, taking her hands.

Her eyes went down to where their hands met, then looked up to meet his own again. "What do you mean?"

"I mean I wish to marry you."

Her eyes slowly widened. She stared at him silently, as if in wonder.

"Well?" he asked, when the waiting grew too much. "*Will* you marry me, Ti'ana?"

"I will," she said, her voice so soft, so quiet, that he felt at first he had imagined it.

"You will?"

Anna nodded, the faintest trace of a smile coming to her lips.

"You *will!*" He whooped, then drew her close and, for the first time, embraced her. Her face was suddenly close to his, less than a hand's width away. The sight of it sobered him.

"I will be a good husband to you, Ti'ana, I promise. But you must promise me something."

"Promise what?"

"That you will be my partner in all things. My helpmate and companion, by my side always, in whatever I do."

Slowly the smile returned to her face. Then, leaning toward him, she gently kissed him. "I promise."

§

Veovis stormed into the room, slamming the door behind him. He grabbed an inkwell from the desk beside him and hurled it across the room, shattering it into tiny fragments.

"Never!" he said, glaring across the empty room. "Not while there's breath left in my body!"

His father, Rakeri, had broken the news to him an hour back. Aitrus was to be betrothed. At first, if anything, he had been indifferent to the news. He had not even heard that Aitrus was seeing anyone. Then, abruptly, he had understood. The girl! The surface-dweller!

Veovis stomped across the room and threw himself down into his chair, gnawing on a thumbnail.

"Never!" he said again, the word hissing from him with a real venom.

His father had explained how the Five had been approached, the documents of precedent laid before them. Again that was Kedri's fault, the traitor! Aitrus need only go before the full Council now to receive their blessing, and that was a formality.

Or had been, in the past.

Veovis took a long, calming breath, then turned his head, staring at the shattered fragments of glass as if he did not recognize the cause, then shuddered.

Never.

§

Aitrus stood before the Five, at the center of the great chamber. All were present. Lord R'hira had read out the formal request; now, all that remained was for the Council to ratify the document.

R'hira stared at Aitrus a moment, then looked beyond him, his eyes raking the levels of the chamber.

"All those in favor?"

There was a chorus of "Ayes," some reluctant, others enthusiastic. For six thousand years the question had been asked and answered thus.

Lord R'hira smiled.

"And those against?" he asked, the question a formality.

"Nay."

R'hira had already turned the paper facedown. He had been about to congratulate young Aitrus. But the single voice brought him up sharp. He stared at Veovis, where he sat not two spans behind where Aitrus was standing.

"I beg pardon, Guild Master Veovis?"

Veovis stood. "I say 'Nay.' "

R'hira's wizened face blinked. All five Lords were leaning forward now, staring at Veovis. This was unheard of.

"Could I possibly have your reasons, Master Veovis?"

Veovis's face was a mask, expressionless. "I need give no reason. I am simply against." And he sat, as if that was that.

As indeed it was. The verdict of Council had to be unanimous in this matter. R'hira looked to Aitrus. The young man had his head down, his own expression unreadable; yet there was a tension to his figure that had not been there before.

"Master Aitrus…" he began, embarrassed. "It would seem…"

Aitrus looked up, his pale eyes hard like slate. "I understand, Lord R'hira. The Council has turned down my request."

R'hira, marking the immense dignity with which Aitrus bore this disappointment, gave a reluctant nod. "So it is."

"Then I will trouble you no more, my Lords."

Aitrus bowed to each of the Five in turn, then, turning on his heel, walked from the chamber, his head held high, not even glancing at Veovis as he passed.

§

"Aitrus! Come now, open the door!"

Tasera stood before the door to her son's room, her husband just behind her in the shadows of the corridor.

When there was no answer, Tasera turned and looked to her husband. "Why did you not say something in Council, Kahlis?"

"I did," Kahlis said quietly, "but it made no difference."

"And is that *it*, then?" she asked, incredulous. "One man says nay and nay it is?"

There was the grating metallic noise of the latch being drawn back, and then the door eased open an inch.

"Forgive me, Mother," Aitrus said from within the darkness of the room. "I was asleep."

"I heard what happened in Council," she said. "We need to discuss what should be done."

"There's nothing can be done," he said. "The Council has given their answer."

No word, then, of Veovis. No individual blame. As if this were the genuine will of Council.

“Nonsense!” she said, angry now. Pushing past him, she went over to the table and lit the lamp. Tasera turned, looking at him in the half light. Aitrus’s face seemed gaunt, as if he had been ill, but he was still, beneath it all, the same strong man she had bred.

“I know you, Aitrus. You are a fighter. I also know how much Ti’ana means to you. Now, will you bow before this decision, or will you fight?”

“Fight? How can I fight? And what can I fight with? Can I force Veovis to change his mind? No. Neither he nor the Council would allow it! And as for persuasion…”

“Then beg.”

“Beg?”

“If Ti’ana means that much to you, go to Lord Veovis and beg him to change his mind and grant you what you want. Go down on your knees before him if you must, but do not simply accept this.”

“On my knees?” Aitrus stared at his mother, incredulous.

“Yes,” she said, standing face-to-face with him. “What matters more to you, Aitrus? Your pride or your future happiness?”

“You want me to beg?”

Tasera shook her head. “You said yourself: He will not be forced or persuaded. What other course is open to you?”

“Aitrus is right.”

Both turned. Anna was standing in the doorway.

“Ti’ana, I…” Aitrus began, but she raised a hand to big him be silent. “I know what happened. Your father just told me.”

“Then you must agree,” Tasera said, appealing to her. “Aitrus must go to Veovis.”

“Maybe,” Anna said, nodding to her. Then she turned slightly, looking to Aitrus lovingly. “You know how proud I would be to be your wife, Aitrus. Prouder than any woman in the whole of D’ni. Yet I would not have you go down on your knees before that man, even if it meant we must spend our lives apart. It would be a violation, and I could not bear it. But there is, perhaps, another way…”

Aitrus raised his eyes and looked at Anna. For a long time he simply studied her, and then he nodded. “So be it, then,” he said, “I will go to him. But I do not hold much hope.”

§

Veovis agreed to meet with Aitrus in his father's study, Lord Rakeri a silent presence in his chair, there to ensure that things were kept within due bounds.

"So what is it that you want, Guildsman?" Veovis said, standing six paces from where Aitrus stood facing him, his hands clasped behind his back.

Aitrus met Veovis's masklike stare with his own. "I seek an explanation for your vote this morning."

"And I decline to give it."

"You do not like her, do you?"

Veovis shrugged. "As I said…"

"…you decline to give your reasons."

Veovis nodded.

"You recall our meeting in the shaft all those years ago?"

"What of it?"

"You recall what happened…afterward? How I helped save your life?"

Veovis blinked. He took a long breath, then: "I was very grateful for your actions. But what of it? What bearing has it on this matter?"

"You made me a promise. Remember? You said then that if there was anything I wanted—*anything*—that was in your power to grant, then I should come to you and you would grant it."

Veovis stood there like a statue, his eyes like flints, staring back at Aitrus.

"*Do* you remember?"

"I remember."

"Then I ask you to keep your word, Lord Veovis, and give me your permission, before the full Council, to marry Ti'ana."

Veovis was silent for a long time. Finally he turned, looking to his father. Rakeri stared back at his son a moment, his eyes filled with a heavy sadness, then gave a single nod.

Veovis turned back. "I am a man of my word, and so your wish is granted, Aitrus, son of Kahlis, but from this day forth I wish neither to

speak with you nor hear from you again. Whatever once existed between us is now at an end. All promises are met. You understand?”

Aitrus stared back at him, his face expressionless. “I understand. And thank you.”

“You *thank* me?” Veovis laughed bitterly. “Just go, for I am sick of the sight of you.”

PART FIVE: THE PHILOSOPHER

The vestibule was packed with guildsmen—Grand Masters and their assistants, great Lords, and other, humbler members of the central D’ni Council—all waiting to enter the great chamber for the debate. As ever before any momentous occasion, the place was buzzing with talk as small groups of cloaked members gathered between the fluted marble pillars to indulge in informal discussion of the new proposal.

At the center of one of the larger groups stood Aitrus, whose proposal it was. In the fifteen years since he had returned to Council, he had established himself as the unofficial leader of the more liberal faction in the House, and was often consulted by the Five on matters of policy. Today, however, he was distracted.

“Any news?” his friend Oren of the Guild of Chemists asked as he joined the group.

“Nothing yet,” Aitrus answered.

“She’ll be all right,” Penjul, another close friend and a Master of the Guild of Legislators, said, laying a hand briefly on Aitrus’s shoulder.

“I guess so,” Aitrus said, but his concern was clear.

“So how will it go today?” Oren asked, looking about him at the dozen or so Masters who formed the core of their faction. “Does anyone have a clear idea?”

There were smiles. Oren, as a Chemist, always wanted a certain answer.

“Whichever way it goes, it will be close,” Hamil, the eldest of their group and Grand Master of the Guild of Messengers, said, pulling at his long white beard. “Much will depend upon the eloquence of our friend here.”

Oren looked to Aitrus. “Then we are lost,” he said, a faint smile at one corner of his mouth. “Master Aitrus has but a single thing in his head today.”

Aitrus smiled. “Do not fret, Master Oren, I shall be all right. Having to speak will distract me from more important matters.”

All nodded at that. Though the proposal was important to them all there, Ti’ana’s health was paramount.

Indeed, without Ti’ana there would have been no proposal, for it was she who had taken them down to the lower city to see conditions for themselves; she who, in the main part, had drafted the proposal.

“They say Veovis is to speak for our opponents,” Penjul said, looking across the vestibule to where Veovis stood, beneath the great arched doors to the main chamber, surrounded by the old men of his faction.

“Then the debate will be long and hard,” Tekis of the Archivists said wryly.

“Long-winded, certainly,” Penjul added, to general laughter.

“Maybe,” Aitrus said, “yet I understand Lord Veovis’s objections even so. He fears that this change is but the thin end of the wedge, and he is not alone in fearing this. Our task is to allay such fears, if not in Veovis, then in others who might vote with him. They must see that we mean exactly what we say and no more. Only then might we win.”

There were nods all around at that.

“And if we lose?” Oren asked.

Aitrus smiled. “Then we find other ways to help the lower city. As Ti’ana has often said to me, there is always more than one way to skin a reekoo.”

§

The chamber was silent as Veovis rose from his seat on the lowest level and, turning, looked about him at the gathered members.

Guildsmen, my Lords…as you know, my task is to persuade you not to adopt this rash proposal. I do not think I need say much. As the present system of governing our city has worked for more than five thousand years, then one might argue that it *has* worked well.”

Veovis paused, his eyes resting briefly on Aitrus, who sat not five spans from where he stood, watching him intently.

"Yet there is another issue here, and that is the question of who runs D'ni. Such measures as are proposed might seem innocuous, yet they are guaranteed to encourage restlessness among the common people, for having tasted power—if only of this limited kind—then would they not want greater power? Would they be content to remain thus limited?

"Besides, as we who were bred to it know to our great cost, power is but one side of the equation; responsibility is the other. Power can be given overnight, but responsibility must be taught. Long years go into its making. Do we not, then, ask a great deal of these common men, however good their intentions, in expecting them to shoulder the burden of responsibility without due preparation? Of course we do. Is it not unfair to ask them to be as wise and knowing as ourselves, when all they have known until this time is service? It is."

Veovis smiled. "And that is ultimately why I say nay to this proposal. Because of the unhappiness it would bring to those who presently are happier than us. Why give them such care? Why burden them with it? No, fellow guildsmen, let us be content and leave things as they are. Say nay as I say nay and let us be done with it. Guildsmen, my Lords, thank you."

Veovis sat, to a murmur of approval. At a signal from Lord R'hira, Aitrus stood.

"Guildsmen, my Lords…As you may know, my wife, Ti'ana, is in labor, and so I, too, ought to be brief."

There was laughter. Even Veovis gave a grudging nod.

"However, let me just say a word or two in answer to my fellow member's comments. I understand how busy Lord Veovis is, yet if he had read my proposal thoroughly, he would see that what I am proposing falls far short of the kind of *power* he suggests we would be relinquishing. Not only that, but I find myself in profound agreement with Veovis. Power is not a thing to be given lightly. And yes, responsibility is a grave and heavy burden and ought to be something one is schooled to bear. That is the D'ni way, and I would not have it changed.

Aitrus paused, looking about him, his eyes going from face to face among the circular levels of the great chamber.

“Let me therefore say it clearly, for the benefit of all, so that there is no mistaking what I am asking you to agree to today. I am as one with Lord Veovis. All matters of policy and funding *must* remain the prerogative of this chamber. I do not contest that for a moment. My proposal is designed to give, not take—to *empower* the common people of D’ni and give them a degree of control over their lives that at present they do not have.”

Aitrus smiled. “I see that some of you shake your heads at that, but it is true, and some of you have seen it with your own eyes. Our people—D’ni, like ourselves—are not poor, nor are they hard done by. They have food and shelter, sanitation and medicines if need be, but—and this is the vital point—their lot could be improved. Greatly improved.”

He looked about him once again, scrutinizing face after face.

“I know what some of you are thinking. Why? Why should we be concerned about improving their lot? Well, let me give you two good reasons. First, just think of whom we speak. We are not talking of idlers and spendthrifts and good-for-nothings, but of good, hardworking people, men and women both. All of us here know a good dozen or more such people. We meet them daily and depend on them for many things. And they depend on us.

“Second, it is often said, with justifiable pride, that D’ni rules then thousand Ages, yet a society ought to be judged not merely by the extent of its empire but by the quality of life of *all* its citizens. We are a rich people. We can afford to be generous. Indeed, I would argue that it is our moral duty to be generous, especially to our own. And that is why I ask you, fellow guildsmen, to say ‘aye’ to this proposal. For D’ni, and so that we might in future look ourselves squarely in the mirror and be proud of what we have done here today. Guildsmen, my Lords, thank you.”

As Aitrus sat, Lord R’hira signaled to the stewards at the back of the hall. Veovis and Aitrus had been the last two speakers; now it was all down to the vote.

R’hira waited as the eight stewards took their places. It was their job to count the hands raised both for and against the proposal. When they were ready, R’hira looked to his fellow Lords, then spoke again.

“All those in favor of the motion raise your hands.”

The stewards quickly counted.

“And those against.”

Again the stewards made their tally.

“Thank you, Guildsmen.”

The stewards turned, making their way down, forming an orderly queue before Lord R’hira. As each gave his ally, R’hira wrote it down in the great ledger before him. As the final steward turned away, Lord R’hira quickly added up the two columns of figures, then looked to either side of him. It was a protocol that the Five Lords did not vote unless a decision was so close—within three votes, usually—that their opinion could decide the matter.

“Guildsmen,” he said, looking back at the rank after rank of members seated around and above him. “It appears that you are divided on this issue. One hundred and eighty-two members for, one hundred and eighty against. In the circumstances, the Five speak *for* the proposal.”

Veovis was on his feet at once. “But you cannot, my Lord! For what good reason…”

He fell silent, then bowed his head.

R’hira stared at the young Lord a moment, then stood, signaling to all that the proceedings were over. “The Council has spoken, Master Veovis. The proposal is carried.”

§

Suahrnir closed the door quietly behind him, then turned, looking across the lamplit room to where his friend Veovis sat in the corner chair, lost in thought.

It was some time since he had seen Veovis quite so agitated, and even though he had calmed down considerably since the Council meeting, there was still a brooding intensity to him that did not bode well.

“Would you like a drink?” he asked, going over to the great stone cupboard beneath the window and picking up one of the three crystal decanters he kept there.

Veovis glanced up, then shook his head.

Suahrnir shrugged, then poured himself a large drink. He took a swig from the glass, then turned, facing Veovis again as the warmth of the liquor filled his throat.

“There must be something we can do,” Veovis said quietly, as if speaking to himself.

Suahrnir smiled. “Maybe there is.”

Veovis’s eyes widened with interest. “Go on.”

“There is a man I know,” Suahrnir said, taking the seat beside Veovis. “They call him the Philosopher. He writes pamphlets.”

“Pamphlets!” Veovis made a sound of disgust. “Really, Suahrnir, I thought you were being serious.”

“I am. This Philosopher is a very influential man in the lower city. People read his writings. Lots of people. And they listen to what he has to say. More so than Ti’ana and the reformers.”

“And just what does he say?”

Suahrnir sat back. “That would take too long. You ought to read one or two of them for yourself. You would like them, Veovis.”

Veovis stared at his friend skeptically, then reached out and took the glass from him, taking a sip from it before he handed it back.

“And what name does this Philosopher go by?”

“A’Gaeris.”

Veovis roared with laughter. “A’Gaeris! The fraudster?”

“It was never proved.”

But Veovis waved that away. “The guilds do not expel their members on the strength of rumor, Suahrnir. Besides, I was there when A’Gaeris was ripped of his Guild cloak. I heard the charges that were on the roll.”

“That was fifty years ago.”

“It does not matter if it was five hundred years ago. The man is untrustworthy.”

“I think you are wrong. I think he could help you.”

“Help me? How? By writing a pamphlet about it?”

Suahrnir looked down. He had never heard Veovis sound quite so bitter. The defeat today had clearly hit him hard; more so perhaps because of who it was had swung the vote against him.

“The Philosopher has no love of outsiders,” Suahrnir said, staring into his glass. “Indeed, he argues that the mixing of bloods is an abomination.”

Suahrnir looked up. Veovis was watching him now. “He says that?”

“That and much more. You should meet him.”

Veovis laughed sourly. “Impossible.”

“Then you will just sit here and brood, will you?”

“No,” Veovis said, standing, then reaching across for his cloak. “I will go home to K’veer and brood, as you clearly do not want my company.”

Suahrnir put his hand out, trying to stop his friend. “Veovis…”

“Tomorrow,” Veovis said, brushing his hand off. “I will be in a better mood tomorrow.”

Suahrnir watched him go, then sighed. Veovis was in a bad mood right now and closed to all suggestions, but maybe in a day or two…

He smiled, then, going over to his desk, began to pen a note.

§

Anna sat up in bed, a huge pile of pillows at her back, cradling the newborn; a serene smile, forged out of tiredness and exultation after a difficult twenty-hour labor, on her unusually pale face.

On a chair to one side, Tasera sat forward, her fingers laced together on one knee, her features set in a permanent grin of delight as she studied her grandson. He was small—much smaller than Aitrus had been at birth—but sturdy, and the midwife said he was a healthy child.

They were on Ko’ah, and it was spring on the island. The scent of blossoms was on the air and birdsong filled the morning’s sunlit silence.

“Where *is* Aitrus?”

“He will be here soon,” Anna said, smiling soothingly at Tasera. “He cannot simply walk away. It *was* his proposal.”

“Even so…”

Tasera stopped, a grin breaching her face. “Aitrus! So there you are! What took you?”

Aitrus greeted his mother, then stepped past her, looking across the room to where Anna lay, his face, at that moment, filled with wonder.

“A boy,” Anna said, smiling back at him.

Aitrus went across, then knelt beside the bed, his face on a level with the sleeping child, his eyes wide at the sight of this, his son.

“Why he’s…”

“…like you.” Anna laughed softly. “He’s beautiful, no?”

Aitrus nodded, then looked up at her. “Thank you,” he said quietly, then, leaning carefully across the child, he gently kissed her.

Again he stared, drinking in the sight of his child the same way he had once studied the sleeping form of Anna, that night before he had asked her to be his wife, the two moments joined like links in a chain.

“Well, little Gehn,” he said, the first hint of a tender smile on his lips. “How is the world?”

§

They had been expecting Master Oren for some hours. He had said he would be late, but as the time went on it began to look more and more as if he would not make the celebration. And then he arrived, his face dark, his manner withdrawn.

Aitrus, about to greet him, saw how he looked and took him aside.

“What is it, old friend?”

“We are summoned, Aitrus,” Oren answered, embarrassed slightly. “All guildsmen must report back to D’ni at once. Two young guildsmen from the Guild of Maintainers have gone missing. We are to search the Ages for them.”

Aitrus blinked. “But that’s…”

“…a mammoth task, yes, Aitrus, which is why the Maintainers have asked for the help of all the other guilds. The circumstances are… suspicious, let us say. They were investigating something important. What it was, we do not know, but Grand Master Jadiris is concerned enough to think that they may have been kidnapped, even killed.”

The news stunned Aitrus. “All right,” he said. “Come in and greet my family a moment, Oren. I, meanwhile, will gather up our friends and tell them the news. Then we shall go.”

Oren nodded. For a moment he gently held Aitrus’s arm. “I am sorry to be the bearer of such ill news on so joyous an occasion. I hear you have a son.”

A brief smile appeared on Aitrus’s features once more. “Come see him, Oren. His name is Gehn and he shall be a great guildsman one day.”

§

An hour later, Aitrus stood before Master Jadaris himself.

“Ah, Master Aitrus. I hear congratulations are in order. A son, eh? That is good news. Very good news indeed!”

“Thank you, Grand Master,” Aitrus said, bowing low.

“You have been told what is happening?” Jadaris asked.

“We are to search the Ages.”

“Indeed. But not all the Ages. Only those which the two guildsmen were known to have personally investigated in the last five years.”

Aitrus frowned. “Master?”

“This must not be known to all, Aitrus,” Jadaris said, lowering his voice slightly and sitting forward, “but a number of blank linking books have gone missing from our Halls. We suspect that the guildsmen took them to carry out their investigations.”

That news was grave. Aitrus saw at once how difficult things were.

“Do we know what they were investigating, Master Jadaris?”

“We do not. But we think they may have found something on one of the Ages they were sent to look at routinely. Something very important. And they may have gone back to try to get conclusive proof, using the missing linking books.”

“How many Ages are involved, Master?”

“More than sixty.”

“And you suspect that a senior guildsman might be involved?”

Jadaris nodded. “That is why we are sending in teams, rather than individual guildsmen. We do not want to take the risk of losing any more of our men. I have assigned you to a team of our own Maintainers.”

“I see. And where would you like me to go, Grand Master?”

“To K’veer.”

“K’veer!”

Jadaris raised a hand. “Before you object, Lord Rakeri himself asked for you, Aitrus. He considers you above reproach and felt that if you were to lead the team investigating his family’s Books, no possible taint would fall upon his family. As you might understand this is a most sensitive matter.”

“Of course. Even so…”

“It is decided,” Jadaris said with a finality that made Aitrus look up at him, then bow.

“As you wish, Master Jadaris.”

§

Lord Rakeri greeted Aitrus on the steps above the jetty. Behind the old man, the great spiral rock of K’veer blotted out all else. It was early, and the light in the great cavern was dim, but across the lakeD’ni glowed like the embers of a fire.

“Aitrus, I am glad you came. And well done. I hear you have a son.”

Aitrus took the old man’s hands in his own and smiled. “Thank you, Lord Rakeri. The boy’s name is Gehn.”

Rakeri returned his smile, squeezing his hands before he relinquished them. “It is a good name. He whom he is named after, his father’s father’s father, was a great man. Or would have been, if time had been kind to him. But come, let us go through. This is a difficult business yet it must be done, so let us do it with some dignity.”

Aitrus nodded, walking beside the old man as they went inside, the other guildsmen—six young Maintainers and one Master of the Guild—following behind.

The great mansion was still and silent. After the laughter of the party on Ko’ah, this seemed a somber, joyless place.

The huge doors to the Book Room were locked. Rakeri took a key from the huge bunch at his belt and unlocked the right-hand door, then pushed it open.

“Will you not come in with us, my Lord?” Aitrus asked, hesitating before stepping inside the room.

“I would rather not, Master Aitrus,” Rakeri said, with a tiny sigh. “This whole matter is difficult. Routine inspections one can live with. They are…*traditional*. But this…this casts a bad light on all, don’t you think?”

“I am sure there is an explanation, my Lord.” Aitrus smiled consolingly. “We shall work as quickly and as efficiently as we can, and I

shall make sure that a copy of my report is placed before you before we leave here."

Rakeri smiled. "That is kind of you, young Aitrus. Very Kind."

§

The Book Room of K'veer was an impressive chamber, and though Aitrus had seen it often before, stepping into it once more he felt again the weight of years that lay upon its shelves.

Shelves filled three of the walls from floor to ceiling—endless books of commentary, numbered and dated on their spines in golden D'ni letters. In one place only, to Aitrus's left as he stood, looking in, were the shelves breached. There, two great windows, paned with translucent stone of varying colors, went from floor to ceiling. Through them could be seen the lake and the far wall of the great cavern.

The whole Book Room was like a giant spur, jutting from the main twist of the rock. There was a drop of ten spans between it and the surface of the lake below.

It was a daunting place for a young guildsman to enter. Rakeri and his family owned six Books in all-six ancient Ages. These massive, ancient books were to be found at the far end of the long, high-walled chamber, resting on tilted marble pedestals, the colors of which matched the leather covers of the Books themselves. Each was secured to the pedestal by a strong linked chain that looked like gold but was in fact made of nara, the hardest of the D'ni stones.

Aitrus walked across, studying each of the Books in turn. Five of them were closed, the sixth—the Book of Nidur Gemat—was open, the descriptive panel glowing in the half light of the early morning.

He had been to Nidur Gemat often, in earlier days, when he and Veovis had been friends. Standing there now, Aitrus felt a great sadness that they had been estranged, and wished he might somehow bridge the chasm that had developed between them these past fifteen years.

Aitrus turned, calling to the Guild Master. "Master Kura. Post two men on the door. We shall start with Nidur Gemat."

The Guild Master nodded and was about to talk to his guildsmen when the door burst open and Veovis stormed into the room.

“I thought as much!” he cried, pointing directly at Aitrus. “I might have known you would have yourself appointed to this task!”

Kura went to intercede, but Veovis glared at him. “Hold your tongue, man! I’m speaking to Guild Master Aitrus here!”

Aitrus waited as Veovis crossed the chamber, keeping all expression from his face, yet a tense combative urge made him clench his right fist where it rested beside his leg.

“Well?” Veovis said, stopping an arm’s length from Aitrus. “Have you nothing to say?”

Aitrus shook his head. He had learned long ago that when someone falsely accused you, the best defense you had was silence.

“You couldn’t keep yourself from meddling, could you? As soon as you heard…”

“Veovis!”

Veovis straightened up, then turned. His father, Rakeri, stood in the doorway. “Father?”

“Leave us now,” Rakeri said, the tone of command in his voice one that Aitrus had never heard him use to Veovis before this hour.

Veovis bowed, then turned glaring at Aitrus, an unspoken comment in his eyes. When he was gone, Rakeri came across.

“Forgive my son, Aitrus. He does not understand how things are. I shall speak with him at once. In the meantime, I apologize for him. And I am sure, in time, he will come and apologize in person.”

Aitrus gave the tiniest nod of his head. “Thank you, Lord Rakeri, but that will not be necessary. Things are bad enough between us. Your apology is quite enough.”

Rakeri smiled and gently nodded. “You are wise as well as kind, Aitrus. Yes, and I regret that my son has lost so good a friend. And no blame to you for that. My son is stubborn, just as his grandfather was.”

There was a moment’s awkward silence, then the old man nodded once again. “Well, Aitrus, I shall leave you once again. Do what you must. We have nothing here to hide.”

Aitrus bowed his head. “My Lord…”

§

A month passed with no word or sign of the two missing guildsmen. Slowly the great sweep of the sixty Ages came to a close. Two days after the departure of Aitrus and the Maintainer team from K'veer, Veovis sat on the veranda at the top of the island, reading his father's copy of the report.

Turning the final page, he read the concluding remarks, then set the report down on the low table at his side and sat back, staring thoughtfully into the distance.

Suahrnir, seated just across from him, studied his friend a moment, then, "Well? What does our *friend* Aitrus say?"

Veovis was silent a moment, then he turned his head and looked at Suahrnir. "He was most thorough. But also fair. Scrupulously so. I may have misjudged him"

"You think so?" Suahrnir laughed. "Personally I think he feels nothing but animosity toward you, Veovis."

"Maybe so, but there is nothing in the report."

"In the official report, maybe…"

Veovis narrowed his eyes. "What do you mean?"

"I mean that what is written down for all to see is not always what is said…in private. What if Master Aitrus gave another, separate report to the Five?"

"Then my father would have heard of such, and he, in turn, would have told me."

"Or to Lord R'hira alone?"

Veovis looked down, then shook his head. "No," he said, but the word lacked certainty.

"What if he found something?"

"*Found?* What could he find?"

"Oh, I don't mean found as in really found. Yet he might *say* he found something."

"And the Maintainers?"

Suahrnir gave an ironic smile. "They could be fooled easily enough. They were, after all, but *apprentice* guildsmen."

The thought of it clearly disturbed Veovis nonetheless he shook his head once more. "Aitrus does not like me, but that does not make him a cheat, not a slanderer."

“Who knows what makes a man do certain things? You hurt him badly when you opposed his marriage to the outsider. It is not the kind of thing a man forgets easily. And it is a more than adequate motive to wish to seek revenge.”

Veovis looked down, his whole expression dark and brooding. Finally, he raised his head again. “No, I cannot believe it of him.”

Suahrnir leaned forward, speaking conspiratorially now. “Maybe not. But there is a way we could be certain.”

“Certain? How?”

“I have a friend. He hears things…from servants and the like. If something secretive is going on, *he* will have heard of it.”

“This friend of yours…who is he?”

Suahrnir smiled and sat back. “You know his name.”

“A’Gaeris!” Veovis laughed dismissively, then shook his head. “You ask me to take *his* word?”

“You do not have to believe anything he says,” Suahrnir answered. ‘But what harm will it do to listen? You might learn something to your benefit.”

“And what does *he* want out of this?”

Suahrnir looked surprised at the suggestion. “Why, nothing. Nothing at all. The man owes me a favor. Besides, I think you will enjoy meeting him. Yes, and he you. You are both strong, intelligent men. I would enjoy watching you lock horns.”

Veovis stared at his friend, then, with a grudging shrug of his shoulders, he said, “All right. Arrange a meeting. But no word of this must get out. If anyone should witness our meeting…”

Suahrnir smiled, then stood, giving a little bow to his friend. “Don’t worry, Veovis. I know the very place.”

§

It was D’ni night. Not the night of moon and stars you would find up on the surface, but a night of intense, almost stygian shadow. The lake was dark, the organisms in the water inactive, their inner clocks set to a thirty-hour biological cycle established long ago and in another place, far from earth.

On the roof garden of Kahlis's mansion, Anna stood alone, leaning on the parapet, looking out over the upper city. Earlier in the evening it had been a blaze of light; now only scattered lamps marked out the lines of streets. Then it had seemed like a great pearled shell, clinging to the dark wall of the cavern; now it looked more like a ragged web, strung across one corner of a giant's larder.

Out on the lake itself the distant wink of lights revealed the whereabouts of islands. Somewhere out there, on one of those islands, was Aitrus. Or, at least, he would have been, were he in D'ni at all.

Anna sighed, missing him intensely, then turned, hearing the child's cries start up again in the nursery below where she stood. For a moment she closed her eyes, tempted to leave things to the nurse, then, steeling herself against the sound, she went across and, bending down, lifted the wooden hatch that was set into the floor. Slipping inside, she went down the narrow stairs and out into the corridor that ran the length of the top of the house.

At once the sound of the crying grew much louder; a persistent, whining cry that never seemed to end; or if it did, it ended but briefly, only to intensify.

Stepping into the room, Anna saw that the nurse had been joined by her male colleague, Master Jura of the Guild of Healers. The ancient looked up from the desk in the corner where he had been writing and frowned at Anna, as if she and not the baby were the cause of the problem.

Ignoring him, Anna walked over to the cot and looked down at her son. Gehn lay on his back, his tiny red face screwed up tight as he bawled and bawled, his mouth a jagged black O in the midst of that redness, his arms and legs kicking in a continuous mechanical movement of distress. The sight of it distressed her. It made her want to pick him up and cuddle him, but that would solve nothing; the crying would go on whatever she did.

"Well…" the Healer said after a moment, consulting his notes, "I would say that the matter is a simple one."

Anna saw how he looked at her, his manner cold and unsympathetic, and felt her stomach tighten.

"The child's problems stem from its stomach," the Healer continued. "He cries because he is not receiving adequate sustenance, and because he is in pain."

“In pain?”

The healer nodded, then looked to his notes again. “If the child were D’ni it would be fairly easy to prescribe something for his condition, but as it is…”

“Forgive me,” Anna interrupted, “but what difference does that make?”

Master Jura blinked, surprised. When he spoke again, there was a note of impatience in his voice. “Is it not self-evident? The child is unnatural. A hybrid. He is neither D’ni nor human, but some curious mixture of the two, and therein lie his problems. Why, it is astonishing that he is even viable!”

Anna felt the shock of what he had said wash through her. How dare he talk of her son as if he were some strange experiment! She looked down at the bawling child, then back at the old Healer.

“Have you *tested* him, Master Jura?”

The old man laughed dismissively. “I do not have to test him. As I said, it is self-evident. One cannot mix human and D’ni blood. To be perfectly honest with you, the child would be better off dead.”

Anna stared at him, her anger rising. Then, with a calmness she did not feel, she spoke.

“Get out.”

The old man had gone back to his notes. At her words, he looked up, glancing first at the nurse, to see if it were she whom Anna had addressed, and then at Anna herself.

“Yes,” Anna said, her face hard now. “*You*, old man. You heard me. Get out before I throw you out!”

“Why, I…”

“Get *out!*” she shouted, focusing her anger on the man. “How dare you come into my house and tell me that my son would be better off dead! How *dare* you!”

Master Jura bristled, then, closing up his notes, he slipped them into his case and stood.

“I will not stay where I am not wanted.”

“Good,” Anna said, wanting to strike the man for his impertinence. “And you,” she said, turning on the nurse. “Pack your things and go. I have no further use for you.”

§

It was a quiet first-floor room in a house in the J'taeri District, overlooking the harbor. As the door closed, Veovis looked about him. It was a staid, respectable room, three large chairs resting against one wall, a large, dark-wood dresser against another. On the third, either side of the huge picture window, were two portraits. He walked across and studied them a moment. Both of the women looked stern and matronly, their clothing dark and austere—the dour uniform of respectable D'ni women for four thousand years and more.

He shook his head, then turned. The city bell was sounding the fourth hour of the afternoon. All was peaceful.

Would A'Gaeris come? And if he did, what would the old fraud have to say?

He could remember how angry A'Gaeris had been, the day of his expulsion—could remember vividly how he had glared at the Grand Master before throwing down his guild cloak and storming from the Hall.

Veovis had been but a student that day, not even a guildsman, let alone a Master. And now here he was, almost fifty years on.

The door behind him creaked open. Veovis turned, to find Suahrnir standing there.

"Has he come?"

Suahrnir nodded, then stood back as A'Gaeris entered the room. He was a tall, broad-shouldered man, but stout in girth and balding, his gray hair swept back from his pate and worn unfashionably long. He wore a simple black tunic and long baggy pants of a similar black cloth. But it was his eyes that drew attention. Fierce eyes that stared intently, almost insolently back at Veovis.

"My Lord," A'Gaeris said, the slightest sneer in the greeting.

"Philosopher," Veovis replied, matching his tone perfectly.

A'Gaeris smiled. "I was not wrong, then."

"Wrong?"

"I said you had fire in you. And I was right."

Veovis smiled sardonically. "That would be praise if from another's lips."

"But not from mine?"

“I do not know you, except by reputation.”

“You have read my writings, then?”

“Not a word.”

A’Gaeris barely batted an eyelid at the news. “Then that is a joy to come.”

“And modest, too?”

“Need I be?”

Veovis smiled, warming to the man. “You are sharp, A’Gaeris, I’ll give you that.”

“Sharp enough to cut yourself on, I warrant. So why are you here?”

“To be honest, I am not sure. I was persuaded that you might help me.”

“Help you?” A’Gaeris laughed, then walked to the window and stared out. “But you are a Lord of D’ni. How can I, a mere common man, help *you?*”

But there was a teasing glint in the Philosopher’s eyes that intrigued Veovis.

“I do not know.”

“No.” A’Gaeris looked back at him and smiled. “But maybe I do.”

“Go on.”

“I hear things.”

“So Suahrnir told me. But are they things worth hearing?”

A’Gaeris shrugged. “What would you know?”

“Something to my benefit?”

“And your foes’ disadvantage?”

“Perhaps.”

The Philosopher smiled. “We share one important thing, Lord Veovis. A love of D’ni, and a belief in the purity of D’ni blood.”

“What do you mean?”

“I speak of your once-friend Aitrus and his ill-chosen wife.”

Veovis narrowed his eyes. “What of them?”

“Only last night, it seems, the outsider woman sent Master Jura of the Healers away with his tail between his legs. And the child’s nurse.”

Veovis looked to Suahrnir again. This was news indeed if it were true.

“Do you know why?”

A’Gaeris grinned broadly. “It seems Master Jura suggested that it might save time and trouble were the half-breed to be peacefully done away with.”

Veovis stared back at him a moment, astonished. “And what did Master Aitrus say of this?”

“What could he say? He is away. But he will know soon enough when he is back.”

“It is a shame.”

“Indeed,” A’Gaeris agreed. “Such a union should never have been allowed.”

“I did all I could to prevent it.”

“I know.” The Philosopher was looking at him now with sympathy and understanding.

Veovis looked down. “It seems you know what I want, Philosopher. But what of you? What do you want?”

“To be your friend.”

Veovis looked up, smiling, expecting some sardonic look upon A’Gaeris face, but those eyes were serious and solemn.

“I have missed the company of my peers,” A’Gaeris said. “It is all very well preaching to the rabble, but it changes nothing. My life ended when the guild threw me out.”

“They had good reason…”

“They had none!”

The sharpness of the rejoinder surprised Veovis.

“I was falsely accused,” A’Gaeris went on. “There was no missing book. Or if there was, it was not I who took it.”

“So you say,” Veovis said quietly.

“So I say,” A’Gaeris said, fiercely now, challenging Veovis to gainsay him a second time.

There was a moment’s silence, then Veovis shrugged. “Give me a day or two to think on this, and then, perhaps, we shall meet again.”

“As you wish.”

Veovis nodded, then smiled. “You say she threw the Healer out?”

“She threatened him, I’m told.”

“Well…” Veovis nodded to himself thoughtfully, then walked over to the door. “It was interesting meeting you, Philosopher.”

“And you, Lord Veovis.”

§

Darkness was rising from the lake as A'Gaeris climbed the back stairs of the lodging house where, for the past fifty years, he had stayed. Corlam, his mute assistant watched him from the darkened window overhead, turning hurriedly to cross the room and light the lamp.

The Philosopher seemed thoughtful tonight. As he came into the room he barely acknowledged Corlam, but went straight to his desk and sat.

The room was a shrine to the Philosopher's endeavors. Apart from the door and window, there was not a square inch of the walls that was not covered in books, piled two deep on broad stone shelves. Some were reference books, others books of Council minutes and resolutions. Some—almost all of those on the shelves at the far end of the rectangular room—A'Gaeris's own journals.

For fifty years he had labored here, since the day he had been cast out of the guild, making his plans, slowly preparing for the day when he could emerge again from obscurity and become a name again. Someone *everybody* knew, and not just the rabble of the lower city.

All this Corlam knew intimately, for, having "adopted" him as a child—an orphan of the lower alleys—A'Gaeris trusted Corlam as he trusted no one else, using him as a sounding board, rehearsing his ideas and thoughts, refining his theories until Corlam knew them almost as well as he.

Corlam went across and stood behind his master, watching as A'Gaeris took his latest journal from the left-hand drawer and, laying it on the desk, opened it and began to write.

Today had been important. Corlam knew that. His master had been in a state of some excitement for days before this meeting, though why exactly Corlam could not ascertain. Lord Veovis was, he knew, an important man, but why his master should desire to meet him only A'Gaeris himself knew, for he had said nothing on this score to Corlam.

"Real books," A'Gaeris said, after a while, glancing up at Corlam. "If only I could get my hands on some *real* Books."

Corlam stared back at him. There were many Books on the shelves—most of them "liberated" from the guild libraries; for, after all, with so many books, the guildsmen rarely ever noticed one was missing—but he knew what his master meant. He was talking about kortee'nea. Blank D'ni Books. The kind one used to link to the Ages.

"I know," A'Gaeris said, smiling at him, then turning back to his journal. "You cannot help me here, Corlam. But maybe our lordship can. Besides, I have a man on the inside now. A friend who wants to help me. If I can persuade *him* to aid me, who knows?"

Corlam looked closer. His master was practicing again. Writing words in someone else's hand. Corlam squinted at the page, then tapped A'Gaeris's shoulder, nodding vigorously. It was Lord Veovis's writing, as clear as day. He had seen examples only the other day, from the records of the Council.

Corlam watched, openmouthed. Though he had watched A'Gaeris do this many times now over the years, he still found it magical the way his master could so easily copy another's hand. He had only to study it an hour and he had it.

Pushing the journal away from him, A'Gaeris yawned and stretched, then turned to face Corlam.

"You know, I had an idea today, Corlam. While I was waiting for his Lordship to turn up."

Corlam smiled, a look of attention coming to his features.

"It's like this," he went on. "I was asking myself how I could get into a place where I should not be—into a Guild strong room, say, or a well-guarded cell—and then get out again without being caught. The easiest way, of course, would be to write a specific linking book to allow me to link into that place. But to get out again I would need a second linking book, and I would have to leave it there. You follow me?"

Corlam nodded.

"So. Getting in would be easy. Getting out without being followed and tracked down by the Maintainers would be extremely hard. Unless…"

A'Gaeris smiled a great smile of self-satisfaction. "Unless, of course, one linked on to another Age, and then another after that. In fact, one might take three separate Linking Books into the cell with one, just to confuse things. But it would be no good having the second and third Linking Books at the place where one linked *to* each time. That would be

no good at all. No. One would need to hide the Book a good hour's walk from where one linked to, so that anyone following you would have to search a wide area in order to find that second Book. Indeed, one could have three or four such Books—only one of which you would use. And when one linked the second time, again you would have an hour's walk to get to the next Linking Book. That way no one could follow you. At least, not quickly, and maybe not at all. A little preparation, two hours' walking, and one would be safe."

For a moment A'Gaeris's eyes glowed, then he looked down. "Of course, one would need a masterful writer to create Ages at will, and, say, a mole inside with access to places such as…cells, for example."

§

Anna was in the laboratory, working on the latest soil samples from Gemedet, when Aitrus came in. Gehn was in the cot on a bench nearby. As Aitrus came across, he stopped to lean over and smile at his softly cooing son before greeting Anna.

Anna looked up from the lens of the microscope and smiled. "I won't be long."

He nodded. "I have had a letter."

"Who is it from?"

"That is just it. It is not signed and the handwriting is unfamiliar."

He handed it to her, then waited as she read it.

"Destroy it," she said, handing it back to him. "And do not get involved, whatever it is."

"But what does it mean?"

"Does it matter?"

Aitrus shrugged. "It is the tone of it that bothers me. 'Something to your benefit'. And all of the secrecy. What do you think is going on?"

Anna sighed. "If it really worries you, Aitrus, hand it over to the Maintainers. Let them send a man along. But don't you get involved."

"All right," he smiled. "I'll destroy it." And having said it, he reached across and, turning on the gas tap, ignited it, and held the corner of the letter in the fine blue flame. When it was well aflame, he dropped it into the sink. "There," he said.

Behind him, Gehn began to whimper. Aitrus went over, lifted the baby from the cot, and cuddled him in the crook of his arm.

"He must be hungry," Anna said. "I'll finish here."

"No, you work on," he said. "I'll feed him."

She smiled. "Don't overfeed him. That was the trouble last time. The poor little mite could barely copy!"

"I know," he said, then, as if it were an afterthought, he added, "I have to go back to my rooms later on. There's a report I have to finish. I'll only be an hour or two. I can join you for a late supper."

Anna grinned. "That would be nice. And maybe we could get away for a few days soon. To Gemedet."

Aitrus nodded. "I shall ask Master Erafir to stand in for me. It is time he took on more responsibility."

"Then go and see to Gehn. But remember, Aitrus, nothing too heavy for his stomach."

§

Aitrus had meant to go straight to his rooms; his feet had lead him partway there, but then curiosity had overcome him and he found himself descending the steps, then walking beneath the gate into J'Taeri District.

I do not have to get involved, he told himself. Whatever it was, he did not have to act upon it. He would observe whatever had to be observed, then leave.

The street itself was an ordinary street, the house a staid, respectable dwelling of the kind merchants often bought. The windows were dark, the door locked. Aitrus turned. The house overlooked the harbor and Kerath's arch, the top of which was almost on a level with where he stood. Across the street, between the facing buildings, was a low wall, from which one could look out over the lake. He went across and stood there, his hands resting lightly on the stone.

There was a faint mist in the cavern tonight. In the narrow streets lamps wavered as wagons moved between the houses. There was a shout from somewhere far below, and then laughter. Otherwise the night was peaceful. Aitrus turned, conscious of a faint gurgling sound. Close by a narrow culvert cut across the street, clear water running in a stream from

the very top of the huge, scallop-shaped city. He bent down and dipped his hand. It was cool.

He was about to turn away and go when he heard footsteps coming along the far end of the street. Looking about him, he spied a nearby doorway and stepped into its shadows.

The footsteps came on, the slow click of leather boots on stone, then stopped. Aitrus hesitated. He was about to risk a glimpse, when a second set of footsteps could be heard, this time from his left, brisker than the first. They paused, then came on again, slower now. There was a low murmur of greeting.

Aitrus peeked out. Two men stood in the lamplight before the door of the house. One was cloaked and hooded, the other, a heavier-set man, wore nothing on his balding head. He looked familiar, but where Aitrus had seen him he could not say. He ducked back into shadow, listening.

"What do you want?" one of them asked, the voice, again, familiar.

"I have something to show you," the second answered. "Something that will interest you."

It was a deep voice, cultured yet with a strangely common edge to it. Whereas the first…

"You want *me* to go in there with you?" the first man asked, and as he did, Aitrus finally recognized the voice.

Veovis!

"Don't you trust me?"

"Alone, at night, in a strange house?" Veovis laughed ironically. "Would *you* trust *me?*"

"Implicitly."

There was a silence, then a huff of resignation.

"All right," Veovis said finally. "I shall trust you. But be warned. I am armed, A'Gaeris."

That name came as a shock to Aitrus. All young guildsmen knew it. No other name attracted quite such infamy. But what was he doing here in J'Taeri, a respectable district? And what was Veovis doing meeting him?

Aitrus peeked out again, in time to see the big, heavyset man place a key in the lock and turn it, then put out his hand, inviting Veovis to step inside.

“You first,” Veovis said, standing back a little, his hand on the hilt of his dagger. “And put a light on. Then I shall come inside.”

A’Gaeris smiled and shrugged, then stepped inside the house. A moment later a light went on in the hall.

Letting his hand fall from the hilt of his dagger, Veovis glanced to either side, then stepped into the house.

Was that it? Was that what the anonymous writer had meant him to see? And if so, why?

Aitrus was about to leave, to make his way back up to the Guild Hall, when a light went on in the ground-floor room to the left of the front door. Easing back against the wall, Aitrus watched as A’Gaeris entered the room, followed a moment later by Veovis.

Veovis, standing in the doorway, seemed ill at ease. He glanced about him, then, satisfied that it was not a trap, closed the door and walked across to where A’Gaeris was rummaging among the papers on a desk. There were a number of slender books among the papers, and A’Gaeris lifted one and handed it to Veovis.

Veovis hesitated, then opened it. He studied it a moment then looked up, his eyes wide.

A’Gaeris smiled, then gestured toward the chair facing him.

§

Aitrus went straight to his rooms in the Guild Hall. He had work to do, but he found he could not work. What he had seen troubled him greatly. Anna was right, of course; he ought to have gone straight to Master Jadaris and put the matter in the hands of the Maintainers, but he had not, and this was the result. Oh, he could go there now, but what proof would he have? It was his word against Veovis’s.

But what was going on? Why were such strange and unlikely companions meeting in a merchant’s house?

Aitrus sat still a long while, trying to fathom it, but he could make no sense of it at all.

Anna. Anna would know. Only he could not ask Anna, because he had promised her he would not get involved. He had burned the note, as if it had held no power over him. But it had. And now he had this dilemma.

Veovis. Maybe he ought to go and see Veovis and confront him openly with what he had seen.

Aitrus thought a while, then nodded. It seemed the right thing to do. No skulking about in shadows. That was not his way. He would take a boat to K'veer in the morning and have it out with Veovis, face-to-face. For there had to be an explanation.

Aitrus put away his files, then left the room, locking it behind him. *Tomorrow,* he told himself, making his way down the long, silent corridor toward the great gate. *It will all come clear tomorrow.*

§

Aitrus rose early the next morning. At supper the previous evening he had said nothing to Anna, nor had he hinted at what he planned. Yet even as he ate a hasty breakfast, a servant brought him in a second letter, the handwriting on the envelope the same as that on the anonymous note the day before.

Aitrus stared at the envelope a long while, then, with a sigh of resignation, slit it open with his fingernail. Inside was a brief note in the same hand as before, but with it was a letter—a letter from Veovis to one of the two young guildsmen who had gone missing thirty days back.

He read it through, then looked to the date at the top of the page. That was the day before the guildsmen disappeared.

"No," he said quietly, setting the letter aside and picking up the note once more. "It is not possible…"

The note read: "Come and see me if you wish to know more" and gave a time and place. That place was the merchant's house in J'Taeri.

Three choices now lay before him: to go to Master Jadaris and lay the matter before him; to go straight to K'veer and confront Veovis; or to wait until tonight and meet the author of the note.

The first was common sense; the second satisfied his sense of honor; but it was the third he would do.

Why? He could not answer why. It was simply how he was.

Forgive me, Anna, he thought, slipping the note and letter into his pocket and rising from his seat.

§

Veovis stood beside A'Gaeris on the great rock, looking out across the massive plain that stretched away below him and shook his head. Everything was subtly wrong. The colors were unnatural, the shapes of trees, even the way the hills were formed, all was wrong. Yet it existed.

He turned, looking through his lenses at A'Gaeris. "Who made this?"

A'Gaeris turned, his eyes gleaming beyond the surface of the protective glasses. "Your old friend, Aitrus."

"Impossible," Veovis said dismissively. "Aitrus and his kin own but two Ages—Ko'ah and Gemedet. Both are strictly monitored by the Maintainers. If either were anything like this…well, it would not be allowed."

"Yet this *is* his Age," A'Gaeris said, smiling now as he handed Veovis the Linking Book.

"No," Veovis said quietly, disbelief vying with horror as he stared at the handwriting on the pages of the Book. It *was* Aitrus's. He had seen Aitrus's hand too often to be in doubt.

"He is experimenting," A'Gaeris answered, matter-of-factly. "Secretly, of course, for he knows the guilds would frown upon his activities. The woman leads him on, of course. Without her he would never have strayed from the D'ni path. It is her insidious influence we see all about us, Veovis. The wrongness…that is her doing."

Veovis looked about him, then nodded, half-convinced.

"Poor Aitrus."

"You pity him?"

Veovis looked up, a flash of anger in his eyes. "He was a good man, once. As you rightly say, the outsider has bewitched him and stolen his senses." He closed the Book and shook it. "If *this* is true…"

A'Gaeris put his arm out, indicating their surroundings. "Can you doubt it?"

"No…no, it is clear to me now."

Veovis sighed heavily.

A'Gaeris stared at him, as if sympathetic. "Would you like me to leave you for a while?"

Veovis nodded, then, with a small sad smile, opened the Linking Book for the Philosopher. The square on the right-hand page glowed softly, showing a picture of a study back on D'ni.

A'Gaeris met his eyes a moment. "There *is* more."

"More?"

"Yes. This is not the only Age he made. Perhaps you would like to see a few before you make up your mind what to do."

Again Veovis nodded, clearly shocked by this news.

"Well," A'Gaeris said finally, putting out his hand. "I shall leave you now. Farewell."

His hand touched the glowing box. In a moment he was gone.

Veovis closed the Book and pocketed it, then looked up again. There was a curious beauty to this world, yet it *was* wrong.

Aitrus had to be stopped. But how? If he went to the Five with this information, Aitrus would be expelled from the Council, stripped of his guild membership, and possibly even incarcerated on a Prison Age. Such was the penalty for making illicit Ages. It would rid him of his chief opponent in Council, but that was unimportant. Besides, he wondered if he could do it if it meant destroying Aitrus and his family. Maybe the woman *was* a pernicious influence, and maybe the child *was* better off dead, but for Aitrus himself he still felt a great sympathy. Despite all their recent animosity, he could not help but remember how good and kind a friend Aitrus had once been. A true friend, unafraid to say as he saw.

Walking to the edge of the great slab, Veovis sat, his booted feet dangling over the drop. What should he do?

I'll wait, he decided, and see what other evidence our friend A'Gaeris has to offer. And then I'll take my father's counsel.

Veovis stood, taking the Linking Book from his pocket and opening it. Then, like a child gently leaping a stream, he jumped out, over the edge of the great rock, putting his hand to the panel as he leapt, linking—vanishing into the air—even as the Book tumbled down into the wilderness of rock and tree below.

§

"Wait here. My master will see you in a moment."

As the boy left the darkened room, Aitrus walked across. What, for the briefest instant, he had taken to be a mirror was in fact a window, looking in to what appeared to be a study. A single wall lamp lit the inner room dimly.

"Strange," he said quietly, surprised to find a window in the middle of a house.

On the far side of the study was a desk. Open upon the desk, recognizable by the tell-tale glow on its right-hand page, was a D'ni book.

Aitrus stared at it, astonished to see it there. Yet even as he looked, a figure formed in the air in front of the desk, until it stood, as solid as everything about it, on the thick, red carpet.

A'Gaeris!

A'Gaeris shook himself, shrugging off the sensation of the link, then went around to the far side of the desk and opened one of the drawers, taking something from within. For a time he sat there, staring down at it, then, sensing a disturbance in the air, he looked up.

As he did, a second figure formed before the desk. Veovis.

A cold certainty swept through Aitrus at the sight. This was ill indeed.

Veovis turned, looking to his seated companion, then nodded.

"All right. You had better show me the others."

A'Gaeris stood. In his hands was another Book. He stepped around the desk and handed it to Veovis.

"There are more," he said. "This is the only one that I have here, but I can bring the others if you wish. Tomorrow night, if that is convenient."

Veovis studied the Book in his hands a while, then handed it back. "Tomorrow," he said. "I shall come tomorrow."

"At this hour?" A'Gaeris asked.

"At this hour," Veovis answered. And then he turned and left, slamming the door behind him.

A'Gaeris stared at the Book a moment, then set it down and turned to face the one-way mirror, looking directly at Aitrus.

"Aitrus. We need to talk."

§

“You did not believe him capable, did you?”

Aitrus looked up wearily. For more than two hours he had worked his way through a stack of letters and documents all in Veovis’s hand.

There was nothing here that was directly incriminating—in almost every case the evidence against Veovis was purely circumstantial—yet the pattern of it seemed conclusive. Enough to convince Aitrus, anyway. He looked back across the desk at the Philosopher. A’Gaeris’s brow was beaded with perspiration. In the wavering candlelight he seemed much older than his eighty-five years.

“How long has he been trading in illicit Books?”

“Two, maybe three years now—that is, as far as *I* know. As I said, I was not sure of it at first. After all, he was a great Lord. A man of real substance. It seemed remarkable—unbelievable, almost—that he should be demeaning himself so.”

“It still is,” Aitrus said, setting the final memorandum aside. “If I had not seen all this with my own eyes.” He stared at it a moment, then looked back at A’Gaeris. “Where did you get these?”

“I have sources,” A’Gaeris answered. “I bought this here, that there, collecting, all the while collecting, until I had enough to be certain.”

“And the Books you are selling him; where did *they* come from? I have heard nothing of missing Books.”

“They were from his friend, Suahrnir.”

“Suahrnir! But…”

Aitrus saw it at once. One of the duties of the Guild of Maintainers was to destroy “failed” Books—D’ni Books that, for one reason or another, had not worked, linking to unstable Ages. These were burned in special guild ovens. Or were supposed to be. And the man in charge of that task was…Guild Master Suahrnir.

“But why does he not deal with his friend Veovis directly?”

A’Gaeris smiled. “They are friends, yes, but neither trusts the other. Besides…” he laughed, “neither knows the other is involved. Suahrnir does not know who buys the Books, and Veovis…”

“Does not know who supplies them, right?”

Aitrus sat back, astonished. Then, “So why are you showing *me* all this?”

A’Gaeris sat forward, the fire of indignation in his eyes suddenly. “Because no one would listen to me. But you, Aitrus, *you* could do something. You could even get to Lord R’hira himself.”

“But *why?”*

‘Because I, who was once an honest man, was barred from the guild for something I did not do, while this Lord’s son, this rock-worm, can do as he will and get away with it. That’s why!”

A’Gaeris’s face was dark with anger. “You must understand. Veovis came to me. And they found out. They must have been watching him. That is why he killed them.”

The room was silent. Aitrus stared at the Philosopher coldly.

“I do not believe you,” he said, finally.

“No,” A’Gaeris said sadly, “yet it *is* true.” He pointed to the last thing in the pile—the Linking book—his eyes grave. “See for yourself if you do not believe me!”

§

Veovis stepped from the boat onto the bottom step, then turned, looking back across the lake toward the sleeping city. Beneath him, dark as pitch, the water lapped softly against the stone. Above and to his right, beyond the stone lip of the harbor wall, a lamp burned steadily atop its pole, reflected in the water farther out.

The great cavern was silent, as if empty of all other life. Only the faint, dull air-rhythm of the great fans could be heard, distant like a heartbeat.

Veovis stretched and yawned. He had much to think about, yet he was tired now and experience had taught him not to make decisions while in the grip of such lassitude. He would sleep on the matter, and in the morning, fresh, reflect anew upon the problem.

He climbed the steps, up onto the black stone jetty. Lianis was awaiting him there, two servants with him. As Veovis emerged, one brought a cloak and wrapped it about his shoulders, while another held up a lamp to light his way.

“Lianis,” he said, greeting his advisor. “You did not have to wait up for me.”

Lianis fell in beside him as they walked across the flags toward the mansion. “You have visitors, my Lord.”

The news chilled Veovis. He glanced at Lianis, then looked away, troubled. Had he been watched? Had someone witnessed his meetings with A’Gaeris? For if so he would be hard stretched to explain his comings and goings.

“Where are they?” he asked, stopping as they came beneath the arch.

“In your study, my Lord. I thought it best to keep this matter discreet.”

“You did well,” Veovis answered, touching his arm briefly. They walked on, through the great doors and down the broad, high corridor, the servant hurrying to keep up with them, his lamp throwing their shadows on ahead of them as they approached the great staircase.

Coming to the first step, Veovis turned to Lianis again. “I will take things from here, Lianis. Send one of the servants in with wine in a brief while. I shall send for you if I need you.”

“My Lord.” Lianis bowed then backed away.

Veovis climbed the stairs alone. At the foot of the steps, the servant held the lamp high, lighting his way as best he could.

His study was to the left. As he stood before the door, Veovis tried to calm himself and still his swirling thoughts. Things looked bad. He had met with a sworn enemy of the D’ni state. And why? To discredit an opponent. It was that simple, and no end of sophistry could cloud the matter. Yet against that was what he now knew of Aitrus and the illicit Ages. Was that enough? Might he claim, perhaps, that he had known before the meetings—had known and wanted confirmation?

Perhaps.

He grasped the door handle and turned it, stepping into the room, a smile forming on his lips.

“Guildsmen…”

The smile froze. Facing him, rising from a chair beside his desk, was the outsider woman, Ti’ana. Cradled in her arms was the half-breed child. As the door clicked shut behind Veovis, she took two steps toward him, her dark eyes accusing him.

“Where is he, Veovis? Where *is* my husband?”

§

Aitrus sat in his study, the Linking Book open on the desk before him. If what A’Gaeris said was true, he would find the bodies of the two young guildsmen on the other side. But could he trust A’Gaeris?

Who knew what kind of Age this really linked to? For all he knew it could be deadly, the air poisonous. On the other hand, it was, in all likelihood, the only real piece of evidence he had against Veovis—*if* things were as A’Gaeris claimed.

Aitrus reached out and closed the book. To link was too risky. If he had had a breathing mask and a second linking book to bring him back to D’ni, he *might* have gone…

If. Besides, there were Anna and Gehn to think of now.

Taking a sheet of vellum from the side, he took his pen from the inkstand and began to write, penning a note to Grand Master Jadaris of the Maintainers. He would send him the linking book and let him decide what should be done. In the meantime, he would take Anna and the child to Gemedet, away from things.

Aitrus signed the note then stood. He did not feel like sleep—his mind was much too filled with things for rest—yet he felt the need to see Anna and Gehn. Walking through to the bedroom he stopped in the doorway, listening for their breathing in the darkness.

Nothing. There was nothing. Slowly he tiptoed across, then crouched beside the bed, putting out his hand. The bed was empty.

He stood, then went across and lit the lamp. The bed was made. There was no sign of them in the room.

For a moment or two he could not think. When he had left, four hours ago, they had been here, asleep.

Aitrus went out, then knocked on the end door, waking his house steward.

“Were there any callers while I was gone?”

“A Messenger came,” he answered, sitting up. “From the Guild House. He brought a message for you from your father. The Mistress—Ti’ana—came down and took it from me. She spoke to the man.”

“Did you hear what she said.”

“No.”

Aitrus thanked him, then went back to his study. There was no sign of the message, but whatever it was, he knew exactly what Anna would have thought. He had told her he was going to the Guild Hall, and any message would have reached him there.

Unless he had not gone to the Guild Hall.

She would have remembered the anonymous note, and, piecing things together, would have gone after him.

Maybe. But why take Gehn? Why not go alone? Unless she had not gone to the house.

Gemedet, then? But again, why, in the middle of the night? Why not wait for him to return?

No, only her fear for him would have made her go out after him. But why should she be afraid? Unless she already knew—knew at some deeper, instinctive level—that Veovis was behind it all.

K’veer!

No sooner had the thought been spawned than it became a certainty in his mind. K’veer! They had gone to K’veer!

Whirling about, he hastened across the room and out, then ran down the corridor, not caring if he woke the house. His booted footsteps thudded on the stairs, yet as he threw open the door, it was to be greeted by the sight of men carrying lamps at his gate and, just beyond them, a dark sedan, suspended between eight uniformed runners. Veovis himself stood beside the carriage, talking to someone within its shadowed interior.

A sudden anger boiled up in Aitrus. Striding down the path, he confronted Veovis even as he turned.

“What are *you* doing here?”

Veovis stared back at him haughtily.

“Come!” Aitrus demanded. “What do you want?”

“Want?” Veovis’s face hardened. “Nothing from you, Aitrus. I deal only with men of honor.”

Aitrus bristled. “You dare to question *my* honor?”

“Say only that I know who D’ni’s friends are, and who its enemies.”

Aitrus felt a flash of hatred ripple through him. He wanted to strike Veovis. To break him as one might dash a plate against the ground.

“You had best hold your tongue, *Lord* Veovis, before I rip it from your mouth!”

Veovis’s eyes flared. “It is you who should be careful, lest I teach you a lesson in manners!”

Aitrus clenched his fist, then, knowing that violence would solve nothing, forced himself to be calm. “I know to whom *my* loyalty lies well enough, Veovis. Would that I could say the same of you.”

“I give my loyalty to those who deserve it,” Veovis responded. “It is no *cheap* thing.”

Aitrus frowned. If that was a jibe at him he did not understand it. What did Veovis mean? Changing tack, he asked the question he ought to have begun with.

“Where is my wife? Where is Ti’ana?”

Veovis’s lips formed a sneer. “Do you not know, Master Aitrus? Surely it is a husband’s *duty* to know where his wife is!”

Aitrus took a step closer, so that his face was but a hand’s width from Veovis’s. He spoke quietly, threateningly.

“Do *you* have her?”

For a moment Veovis simply stood there staring back at him, his eyes yielding nothing, then he turned and, drawing back the curtain of the sedan, reached in and, grasping her roughly by the hand, tugged Anna from her seat.

Anna glared at Veovis, then turned back, reaching in to take the sleeping child from the nurse within the sedan.

“A pretty pair you make!” Veovis said, a heavy sarcasm in his tone now. “Neither knows where the other is!”

Aitrus looked to Anna, his eyes concerned, but she shook her head, as if at some unspoken question. Cradling Gehn, she moved past Aitrus, then turned, standing at his shoulder.

“Thank you,” she said, speaking to Lord Veovis. “I am sorry to have troubled you.”

“No trouble,” he answered, his cold eyes never leaving Aitrus’s face. “No trouble at all.”

§

“Master Aitrus. Their Lordships will see you now.”

Aitrus pulled himself up off the bench, then followed the guildsman along the corridor to where two guards stood before a pair of huge double doors.

For a week he had wrestled with his conscience, not knowing what to do. It was A’Gaeris’s role in things that worried him most. The man had no love of D’ni, and to bring down D’ni’s favorite son, Veovis, would fit in well with any plans he had for vengeance. All well and good, yet Aitrus had seen the book, and still had the linking book in his possession. That was Veovis’s hand and no mistake. And A’Gaeris’s indignation, that burning sense of injustice Aitrus had glimpsed the last time they had met, that, too, had seemed genuine.

Anna had begged him to go straight to Master Jadaris and leave the Maintainers to deal with the matter, but that would have meant going behind Lord Rakeri’s back, and that Aitrus would not do.

And so, eight days on, he had gone to see Lord Rakeri in his rooms in the Halls of the Guild of Miners. The old man had greeted him warmly. There, over a cup of mulled wine, he had told the old man of his son’s activities.

Aitrus could see how torn the old man was. He had always treated Aitrus like a second son, even after the breach in Aitrus’s friendship with Veovis, but suddenly there was a coldness, a distance in his manner. The old man had stared long and hard at the linking book, and then he had nodded.

“Leave it with me, Master Aitrus,” he said, his voice cold and formal, “I shall make sure that the matter is fully investigated.”

A long silence had followed. But now, a full month after that audience with Rakeri, the matter was to be decided.

As the doors swung back, Aitrus looked about him. Beside the five Lords who sat behind the great desk on the far side of the chamber, there were six others, seated at desks to either side of the room. To his left were three guild scribes, to his right two senior guildsmen in the Guild of Maintainers, and, slightly apart from them, their Grand Master, the elderly Jadaris.

There was no sign of Veovis.

Aitrus felt relief flood him. He had been feeling awkward enough about this, but had Veovis been there in person it would have been far

more difficult.

"Take a seat, Master Aitrus," Lord R'hira said, looking up from a document.

Aitrus sat, then glanced at Rakeri. The old man was looking down, distracted, it seemed, the fingers of one hand drumming idly on the leather cover of an official-looking file. He did not look well these days, as if the cares of this inquiry had fallen heavily on his shoulders.

R'hira looked directly at Aitrus. "In view of what you told us, a unit of the City Guard was sent to the house in J'Taeri District and a thorough search was made. Unfortunately, no trace of any of the papers you mentioned could be found. This is not to say that they do not exist somewhere, but without them we have only your word. That in itself is no small thing, Guild Master Aitrus, yet it is not evidence, as defined by D'ni law." He paused, then. "It comes down to this. After long consideration we have decided that we cannot possibly risk using the linking book. To risk a third life would be, we felt, a reckless chance, and without the direct evidence of which you speak—that is, the bodies of the two guildsmen—then it is a matter of your word against that of Veovis."

Aitrus blinked, surprised.

"Forgive me, Lord R'hira, but I find this situation intolerable. Either I am a liar or Lord Veovis is. If you will not send another guildsman, I am prepared to go."

There was a moment's silence, then Lord R'hira nodded. "It shall be as you say."

Aitrus stood, then walked across and, taking the Book from Lord R'hira, and a Linking Book, he opened the Book in question, placing his hand against the glowing panel.

There was silence in the room. A few moments later Aitrus reappeared, his face ashen.

"It is true," he said. "There are bodies there."

§

That evening a warrant for Veovis's arrest was issued. Though the day was now advanced, K'veer still blazed with lights. Every room was lit, every lantern burned brightly. Men from both the City Guard and the Guild

of Maintainers were everywhere; in every room and every corridor. It was clear that a thorough search of the island had been undertaken.

Climbing the great stairway at the heart of the rock, Aitrus began to wonder just what he had set in motion. It was true what people said about the messenger who brings ill news.

Passing the entrance to the Book Room, Aitrus saw how armed teams of Maintainer guards were waiting there, ready to link into the family Ages. That, as much as anything, told him that they had not yet taken Veovis.

So he is guilty, he thought, surprised despite all, for some small part of him still held that this was all a mistake and that an explanation would be found. But no. If Veovis was missing, then there could be but a single explanation.

Master Jadaris was waiting for him in Lord Rakeri's study, near the very top of the island mansion. It was a regular cave of a room. There were no windows; instead, huge, book-lined shelves filled every inch of the walls.

"Ah, Aitrus," Jadaris said, looking up at him from behind the great desk. The Linking Book lay before him, open, the tiny panel glowing in the half-light of the room. "We have searched high and low, but there is no sign of Lord Veovis in D'ni. In the circumstances I have given the order for the family Ages to be searched. That will happen now. But there is one other matter we must deal with."

Jadaris waved a hand over the Linking Book. "A guildsman ventured in four hours back. He found another Book at the foot of the slope. It linked back to this very room."

Aitrus nodded soberly. There was a moment's silence and then Master Jadaris stood.

"So, Aitrus. Will you link through with me?"

§

They linked to a cave on the eastern slope of a large, mountainous island. A cluster of smaller islands surrounded I, linked by suspended wooden bridges. It was on one of these that they finally found the two guildsmen, lying side by side in a hut beside the cliff's edge, their hands

and feet bound tight. They were long dead, their cloaks stiff with their own dried blood, their throats slit from ear to ear. On the floor nearby was the dagger that had been used to kill them, lying beside its sheath as if abandoned.

It was Veovis's weapon. One he had been seen to carry often.

Aitrus saw how Jadaris stared at the dagger; saw the strange flicker in the muscles of his neck, the sudden change in his eyes, and knew that this had finally convinced him. These were *his* men who had been murdered—his young boys. To see them like this—trussed and butchered—had clearly shocked him deeply.

As a team of Maintainers arranged to bring the bodies back, Aitrus and Master Jadaris linked back to K'veer. There they were greeted by the news that Veovis had been taken in Nidur Gemat and was being held in the Book Room down below.

They went down, Aitrus hanging back as Jadaris walked across to confront Veovis.

Veovis's hands were bound behind his back. Two guards—Maintainers—stood to either side of him, yet Veovis seemed unrepentant. His head was raised defiantly and his eyes burned with indignation.

Jadaris held the sheathed dagger out before him. "Is this yours, Master Veovis?"

"It is," Veovis said. "What of it?"

"You do not deny it, then?"

But Veovis seemed not to hear. He took a step toward Jadaris.

"What have I done to deserve this treatment, Master Jadaris? Am I a common criminal to be bound and herded like an animal?"

"We found the bodies," Jadaris said.

But Veovis did not seem to be listening. "I am not normally an impatient man, but I warn you, Guildsman. Unbind me now or you shall answer to my father!"

A shiver went through Jadaris. "It was your father who ordered it."

Veovis fell silent; the words had taken him aback. "Impossible," he said. "He would never have given such an order."

"Never?" Jadaris seemed to watch Veovis a moment, then: "Do you deny the charges?"

“Charges?” Veovis laughed coldly, then tilted his head slightly. His eyes were hostile now. “I do not understand you, Master Jadaris. Of what precisely am I charged?”

“Of trading in illicit Ages. And of murder.”

The look of shock in Veovis’s face surprised Aitrus. For a moment Veovis seemed unable to speak, then he shook his head. “But this is ridiculous! I have done nothing.”

“We have the proof,” Jadaris said coldly. “But I am not your judge, Veovis. At least, not alone.”

Jadaris seemed to straighten, taking on his full authority, then spoke again.

“Guild Master Veovis, you will be taken from this place to the Guild Fortress of Irrat where you will be held until a date is set for your trial.”

“My *trial?*” Veovis’s expression was one of sheer disbelief.

Jadaris nodded, yet he seemed far from triumphant. “This is a sad day for the guilds, Lord Veovis. You have brought great shame upon us, and even greater shame upon your father.”

“But I have done nothing!”

Jadaris glared at him. “*Nothing?* You will be silent, Guild Master, or I shall have you gagged!”

Veovis blinked, astonished. His mouth opened, then snapped shut.

“Good,” Jadaris said curtly. “Now take him from here before I am tempted to do to him what he did to those poor boys.”

§

Aitrus returned home to find the blinds drawn, doctors hurrying to and fro. His mother, Tasera, greeted him in the hallway, her face gaunt, her eyes troubled. Gehn had worsened, it seemed, and almost died. It was she who had finally called in the healers, when all else seemed hopeless.

Aitrus went through to the nursery, fearing the worst. Anna was sitting beside the cot, clearly exhausted, staring down at the feverish child as he lay there like a waxwork doll, his eyes closed, his breathing shallow. Nearby, a doctor spoke quietly, urgently to one of his colleagues, then, seeing Aitrus, came across.

“There’s little we can do,” he said sorrowfully. “We have tried several remedies, but the child seems unable to keep anything in his stomach. I fear it is up to the Maker now.”

Aitrus thanked the man, then went over and knelt beside Anna, resting his hand lightly on her knee.

“Ti’ana?...Ti’ana It’s Aitrus. I’m back.”

She turned her head slowly and looked down at him. “He’s dying, Aitrus. Our son is dying.”

The desolation in her face was unlike anything he had ever seen. “No,” he said softly. “He’ll come through.”

But she was not to be consoled. “You did not hear him, Aitrus. The sounds he made. Such awful, dreadful sounds. And the spasms. Twice I thought I’d lost him.”

“Maybe,” he said, “but he’s still here.”

He took her hands and clenched them, looking up into her face. “Won’t you fight for him, Ti’ana? Won’t you help our son survive?”

Anna closed her eyes, pained by his words. “I’ve tried, Aitrus. The Maker knows I’ve tried my best. But I am so tired now. So very, very tired.”

“Then rest, my love. It’s my turn now.”

Aitrus stood, then, bending down, lifted Gehn from the cot, holding him tightly, securely against his shoulder. The child whimpered a little, then settled against him. He was so light now; there was so very little of him. The lightest breeze would carry him off.

Aitrus shuddered, filled with an ineffable tenderness for his infant son. “Come now, little one,” he said softly as he carried him from the room. “Let us see what a little sunlight can do for you.”

§

Veovis looked up from the summary document and sighed. It was lies, every word of it, yet even he could see how convincing a case Aitrus had made against him. If the Five believed this—and why should they not?—then he would be found guilty, without a doubt.

Suahrnir. Suahrnir was the key, but Suahrnir could not be found.

Veovis's own statement lay on the desk beside his elbow—six pages in his own hand. At best it seemed naïve, at worst a tissue of lies and excuses. He knew which his fellow guildsmen would think.

They had let him see the evidence against him; the books and documents and letters, all of it written, or so it appeared, in his hand. Good forgeries they were—the best he had ever seen—but forgeries all the same, for he had not written a single word of what they had shown him.

He had pointed the finger at Aitrus, but they had expected that. It was to be expected, after all. To "humor" him, and perhaps to mollify his father, they had even searched back in he guild records to see whether there might not be some earlier instance of such fraud, one that might be attributable to Aitrus, but there was nothing.

Aitrus was a clever one. None cleverer. He played the honest man. But Veovis knew better. He knew now what a snake Aitrus was.

He heard the cell door open behind him and turned to see a guard bring in a pile of clean clothes and place it on the bed in the far corner of the room. Another guard stood in the door, blocking it. The sight of it almost made him laugh, for it suggested that he might try to escape, and when did a D'ni Lord run from his fate?

Veovis turned back to the copy statement, then pushed it away from him. It was no use. There was no way he could answer this. It was like grasping at phantoms.

He even understood it, now that he had had time to reflect upon it.

How long had Aitrus prepared this? Since he had refused to countenance the wedding, no doubt.

Veovis stood and stretched. Was that all Aitrus wanted? To bring him down? Or was there more? Was there some further part he could not see?

Veovis crossed the room and sat on the edge of the bed, beside the pile of clothes. He felt weary now and in need of sleep. Too much had happened much too quickly.

He reached out and picked up the pile of clothes meaning to move it so that he could stretch out on the bed, but the pile was heavier than he expected. Strangely heavy, in fact. He put it down, then began to sort through it, his brows knitted.

There! Halfway down the pile his fingers closed on something hard. A book! A leather-covered Book! He drew it out and stared at it,

amazed. There was no mistaking it—It was a Linking Book. He opened it. There, on the right-hand page, the tiny panel glowed invitingly.

It was a trap. It had to be, or a test of some kind. He closed the Book and set it down.

A trap. Of course it was.

But what if it was not. What if this was his father's doing? Veovis stood, then closed his eyes, wracked by indecision. This was his chance to prove himself an honest man. If he handed in the Book…

He groaned, then sat once more. Who was he fooling? They would find him guilty whatever. The evidence was too strong against him. And what then? Two hundred years, he'd spend, trapped on some hideous, tiny island on a Prison Age, watched every second of the day and night.

The thought was unbearable. Opening the Book again, he placed his hand against the panel…and linked.

§

Lord R'hira stepped into the empty cell and looked about him. The Linking Book lay on the bed where Veovis had left it only a moment before. He stared at it, then shook his head. A while later he heard a shout from farther down the hallway—a curse that turned into a groan.

So now you know, R'hira thought sadly. And what will that knowledge do to you, Veovis?

The Book had linked to an enclosed room on a different Age, in which was a table. On that table was a second Linking Book and a tank of acid. It was a classic escape maneuver, and Veovis, naturally, had seen exactly what to do.

But that second Book linked right back to D'ni—to the interrogation cell at the end of the hallway, wherein sat Master Jadaris and his guards.

R'hira sighed. Had Veovis known it was a test? Or was this simply some final piece of arrogance on his part?

He turned. Rakeri was standing in the doorway, his eyes dark with the knowledge of what his son had done.

"I'm sorry," he said quietly, but Rakeri shook his head.

"Do what you must," the old man said. "I wash my hands of him."

§

Aitrus woke, not knowing where he was. It was bright, too bright to fully open his eyes.

Gemedet. I must be on Gemedet.

Squeezing his eyes shut again, he searched about him with his hand until his fingers closed upon his glasses. He pulled them on, then slowly opened his eyes again. The filters in the glass made the brightness bearable.

It was morning. Or maybe afternoon. How long had he slept?

Then he remembered.

“Gehn!”

He sat up, looking about him anxiously, then relaxed. Gehn lay not three feet away from him, swaddled in a blanket where Aitrus had laid him last night. He lay there silently, his tiny glasses shielding his eyes against the light that shone in a broad hand through the window just above them.

Aitrus shuffled across, then picked up his baby son, cuddling him for a moment, then putting a hand lightly to his brow.

The fever had passed.

Gehn stared back at him, curiously, his eyes placid, calm. D’ni eyes, for all the doctors said.

“You came through,” Aitrus said, smiling at him, proud suddenly of his son. “Look at you, there’s nothing of you, Gehn, yet you came through. You *lived!”*

There was a noise outside. Aitrus turned. Was it some forest animal, sniffing about the camp? Then he heard the soft hum of Anna’s voice and smiled.

He stood, carrying the child out to her. She was standing with her back to him, looking out across the valley and the mist-wreathed waterfall. For a moment he simply stood there, watching her, conscious of how the sunlight formed a shining wreath about her long, flowing hair, then he spoke.

“Ti’ana?”

She turned, smiling at him. “I wondered when you would wake.”

“Look,” he said, holding out Gehn to her. “The fever’s gone.”

“I know,” she said, coming across and taking Gehn from him. “I came in earlier and saw. I thought I’d let you both sleep.”

He looked up at the sky. The sun was sinking toward the west. “It’s late,” he said. “How long have we slept?”

“A full day and more,” she said, smiling broadly at him. “It clearly did you good.”

“Yes,” he agreed. Then, as if suddenly recalling something, he laughed. “You know, I had a dream last night.”

“A dream?” She looked at him, intrigued. “What kind of dream? A pleasant one I hope.”

He smiled. “Oh yes. I dreamed we walked the tunnels to the surface. You and I…and Gehn. And you took us to all of those places you have told me of in the past, even to Tadjinar itself.”

“And the Lodge?”

“Yes.” He nodded, staring out past her as if he really saw it. “I dreamed that we stayed there and that I sat there in the window with you, looking out across the desert. There was a full moon above us and the sky was full of stars. And Gehn…I could hear Gehn sleeping in the room behind us.”

“Maybe it will happen, one day.”

“You think so?”

She was quiet a moment, then, “I heard what happened…with Veovis.”

“Ah…” He nodded, then, “I do not know what to think, Ti’ana. The Veovis I knew would never have acted in such a fashion.”

“Yet people change.”

Aitrus looked directly at her. “Do they? I am not so sure, my love. What a man is, he is. Though Veovis is no friend, I would yet trust him above many who call themselves my friend. And do you forget…he brought you home that time.”

“It was but common courtesy.”

“Was it? And yet that same man is charged with callously murdering two guildsmen. Do you really think him capable of that?”

Anna looked down, troubled. “Of course…you have not heard, have you?”

“Heard what?” Aitrus asked.

“The Five Lords tested him. Secretly gave him a Linking Book, in his cell on Irrat. He took it and tried to escape. No honest man would do that, would they?”

Aitrus stared at her a moment, then looked down. “So it si true, after all.”

“It seems so.”

“And Lord Rakeri? How has he taken the news?”

“Badly,” Anna said, rocking Gehn gently. “It appears he has taken to his bed. Some say his is dying.”

Aitrus looked down, touched deeply by the news. “Then it is an ill day for D’ni,” he said quietly. “An ill day indeed.”

§

The narrow streets leading to the great Guild House were packed as the carriage carrying Veovis rattled through the gates, drawn by two great oxen.

After twenty days of evidence, the Council was to give their verdict. Never before had so high a public figure been on trial, and never for such heinous crimes.

To trade in illicit Books was bad enough, but to kill one’s fellow guildsmen, that was unheard of. And that was why they crowded into the narrow spaces between the great houses of the upper city, straining to get a glimpse of the villain of the piece, Veovis.

Some saw him as a greedy man, for whom great riches had never been enough. Others commented on his hypocrisy and saw his protestations of innocence in the face of such a weight of fact as a sure sign of his mental instability.

This was the atmosphere in which Veovis stepped down from the carriage, and, climbing the marble steps of the Guild House, crossed the outer room and entered the great chamber to hear the verdict of his peers.

A temporary gallery had been built at one end of the chamber especially for the occasion—a temporary affair that seated those few dozen guests who had been invited by the Council to bear witness. Among these were the families of the two dead guildsmen, A’Gaeris, and Aitrus’s wife, Ti’ana.

Anna was now a D’ni citizen. In a private ceremony, a week earlier, she had become by law what blood nor marriage could make her. It was a precedent, but one the Council approved.

But now the moment had come. As Veovis stepped out between the great doors, a silence fell over the great, circular chamber. From their seats on the various levels, every member turned to look.

Veovis had had his hair cut stubble short. He wore a simple one-piece of rust-red cloth. There were iron manacles about his wrists, linked by a short length of chain, and manacles at both ankles, from which two fine steel chains led back into the hands of a Maintainer guard; a big man, capable, it seemed, of holding back a team of horses.

Even so, Veovis stood there a moment with his head high, his eyes as proud, as unbowed, as an eagle’s, then he began to descend the steps, passing between the great pillars.

Below Veovis, in the center of the chamber, stood the five great thrones of the Five Lords of D’ni, but today only four of them were filled. As Veovis came to a halt in the space before them, the great Lords stared at him like living statues, their dignity immense.

There was a moment’s silence, tense, expectant, and then Lord R’hira spoke.

“Guildsmen. Have you decided?”

There was a resounding “Aye!” from all sides of the chamber.

“And your verdict?”

“Guilty!” 360 voices said as one.

It was done. Veovis seemed to tremble; yet his head did not waver, nor did his eyes show even a flicker of regret. If anything he seemed even more defiant than before.

R’hira looked to him, his ancient eyes cold, no trace of compassion in them. “Before I come to your sentence, is there anything you would like to say, Guild Master Veovis?”

Veovis met the ancient’s eyes, then shook his head.

“Very well, then it is the decision of this House that you be stripped of all rank and that from henceforth your membership of the guild be annulled. Further, you will be taken from here and on the seventeenth hour fifteen days hence will be transferred to a suitable Prison Age, to be held there for the remainder of your natural life.”

All eyes were on Veovis. From her seat in the gallery Anna saw how fine, how dignified he looked in this his final moment and felt the slightest flicker of doubt cross her mind. Yet he *was* guilty. She had heard and seen enough these past twenty days to know that much. Glancing across, she saw how A'Gaeris was leaning forward. What was that gleam in his eyes? Delight that justice had finally been done? Or was it simple gloating?

She looked down briefly, a shiver of distaste running through her, then looked back, her eyes seeking out Aitrus where he sat in the first row, just behind Veovis.

As Veovis turned, preparing to climb the steps again and leave the chamber, he halted briefly, right in front of Aitrus, staring down at his once-friend. Something seemed to be said, then he walked on, his bare, manacled feet climbing the stone, the big Maintainer trailing behind.

Anna waited, as the great Lords ended the session, then, as the members began to stand, a great murmur of talk rising in the chamber, she hurried quickly down the steps.

Aitrus was standing in the midst of a tiny group of other members. As she stepped into their circle they broke off their animated discussion, bowing to her respectfully.

"What did he say?" she asked, looking anxiously to Aitrus.

He hesitated, conscious of the others listening. "Not here, Ti'ana."

She frowned. "Did he threaten you?"

Aitrus shook his head, but he was awkward now. Looking about him apologetically, he stepped across the circle and, taking Anna's arm, led her away.

"Well?" she asked, when they were outside, out of the hearing of the others. "What did he say?"

Aitrus turned from her, as if he could not face her. He seemed pale now, discomfited. "He blames me."

"Is that what he said. That he blames you?"

Aitrus shook his head.

"Well, *tell* me, Aitrus. What *did* he say?"

Aitrus turned, looking directly at her. " 'You should have let me fall.' That's what he said."

"But you are not to blame."

“No? I wish I could believe that. At he end there, watching him—even after all that was said and shown—do you know what I thought? I thought he was innocent. *That* is what I thought. And yet I said ‘Aye’ with all the rest. And sent him to his rock.”

“Do you want to do something? To say something, perhaps, to the Five?”

He laughed bitterly. “What could I say? No. I must live with this, Ti’ana. Knowing I might have been wrong. Yes, and knowing that I was the one who set the wheels in motion. Those great wheels of the D’ni state that can crush a man as easily as our great hammers pound the rock.”

They stood there a moment, silent, staring at each other, and then Anna took his arm and led him out. Yet even as they stepped out beneath the massive arch at the front of the Guild House, the great bell on Ae’Gura began to sound, sending its sonorous tones across the cavern.

Lord Rakeri was dead.

PART SIX: THE INK IN THE WELL

It was the fourth anniversary of Gehn’s naming day and a solemn ceremony was taking place in the family mansion in D’ni. Until today, Gehn had been a child, free to play as a child played, but from this hour onward he would take the first steps toward becoming a guildsman.

Looking on, Anna felt deeply for her son. Standing amid the guild officials, little Gehn looked terrified. His hair had been cut and he was wearing guild clothes—duplicates of those his father, Aitrus, and his grandfather Kahlis wore as they stood on either side of him. In front of them, behind a special trestle table that had been set up in the room, stood Yteru, the Grand Master of the Guild of Books. It was to his guild that Gehn was to be apprenticed, and the boy would join them in their halls two weeks from now.

Two days ago, knowing how much her son was dreading the occasion, Anna had gone to Aitrus in his study and asked him if Gehn really did need to join the guild just then. He was sure to miss home dreadfully, but Aitrus was adamant. It was the D’ni way, and if Gehn was to be considered D’ni and make his eventual way in the world, then he must conform to the ways of the guilds.

And so she was to relinquish him, long before he was ready to be taken from her. It would break his heart and hers, but maybe Aitrus was right. Maybe, in the long run, it *would* be best for him. Yet she had her doubts.

As the Grand Master called the boy forward, she found herself praying silently that he would remember the words she had taught him—the words of the guild oath.

Slowly, stumblingly, Gehn forced them out. As he finished, Master Yteru smiled benevolently down at the child, then, in a slow, sonorous drawl, uttered the words of acceptance.

And so it was done Her son was now a guildsman.

Afterward, she held him, telling him how proud she was, but she could see the fear of separation in his eyes.

Aitrus had been saying his farewells to the guildsmen; now he came back. He stood in the doorway, looking in at her and Gehn. “Are you angry with me?”

She nodded.

He sighed, exasperated. “I am sorry, Ti’ana, but you know how things stand. It is the D’ni way, and we cannot afford to act differently. That would be self-indulgent. You knew that when you became D’ni.”

“I know,” she said, as angry at herself as at him, “but I did not think it would be so hard.”

“No. But there is one thing we can do. Before Gehn goes, that is.”

“You want to go to Gemedet?”

Aitrus shook his head. “I promised you once. Remember?”

At first she did not understand; then her eyes widened.

He nodded.

“Yes, Ti’ana. It’s time our son saw where his mother came from.”

§

The journey through the tunnels took two days. On the morning of the third they came to the cavern where the two great digging machines stood silently. As Anna and Gehn came up beside him, Aitrus turned to them and smiled.

“We are almost there.” He pointed across at the great red wedge of rock facing them. “There is this seal. The surface must be just above.”

Anna nodded. “This is where I came in. I remember it vividly. The machines…” She stared at them fondly, then smiled. “Do you know what I thought, Aitrus?”

“No, tell me.”

“I thought I had discovered the tomb of a great king. And these… I thought these were the remains of some great civilization, a long-lost race of giants, perhaps, or…” She laughed. “Little did I know.”

Aitrus looked at her fondly. “I am glad you chose to look, Ti’ana. But for that curiosity of yours, I would have been lost.”

Anna looked away, a smile on her lips. “Oh, I am sure some young D’ni maiden would have found you.”

He laughed. “Maybe. But let us press on now. I am impatient to see the surface.”

Gehn, who had been silent until that moment, now spoke up. “Daddy? Why did we not *link* to the surface?”

Aitrus came back and, crouching before his son, began to explain. “If this were a different Age, then we might have linked to it, but the surface is in the same Age as D’ni and one cannot link to a place in the same Age.”

“What, *never?*” the boy asked, wide-eyed.

“Never,” Aitrus said, smiling patiently.

Gehn frowned, considering that, then looked back up at his father. “But how will we find our way back to D’ni?”

Aitrus took his notebook from his pocket and opened it. Inside, between the tanned leather covers, were page after page of maps and diagrams. Aitrus flicked through it for a while, then, coming to the page, turned the notebook so that Gehn could see.

“ Look, Gehn. Here is it a map of the tunnels. I have been making notes as we went along. We only need trace our way back.”

It seemed to satisfy the boy. He grinned, then went across to his mother, who stood beneath one of the great machines. She put her arm about him, then looked back at Aitrus.

“When I first saw these, I was convinced that whoever had made them must be long dead, for what kind of race would make such wonderful machines then leave them in the Rock?”

Aitrus smiled then walked across to her. “Was it this one that you climbed?”

She nodded.

“You climbed it, mama?” Gehn asked, looking up at his mother and wide-eyed wonder.

“I did. And then I walked down into D’ni. Only I did not know it was D’ni. Not until long after.”

They went through the gap, Anna leading the way, Gehn close behind. Reaching the pocket, Aitrus lit the lantern again. He knew what lay ahead—Anna had already told him—but now they were so close, he felt a strange excitement. How many years now had he waited for this?

Fifty years, at least.

Anna was first to climb down. At the bottom she turned, reaching up to take Gehn as Aitrus let him down. Then they were in the cavern, where it had first began for Anna, all those years ago. She looked to him.

“It hasn’t changed.”

They went on, climbing up into the tunnel and along, until the three of them stood before the rock fall.

Aitrus set the timer, then took them back to a safe distance. There was a huge bang. The whole tunnel shuttered. As the smoke cleared, Anna picked Gehn up and, following Aitrus, walked through, stepping over the rubble.

It was night. A full moon rested with a shining disk of silver in the center of the blue-black velvet sky. Surrounding it, a billion flickering stars shown down.

Aitrus stood there at the entrance to the tunnel, steering up at the moon. Beside him, Anna held Gehn against her side, her face close to his, and pointed.

“Look, Gehn. That’s the moon.”

“Moon,” he said, snuggling in to her, tired now.

Anna smiled then turned her head, looking to Aitrus. He met her eyes and smiled.

“Come,” he said, taking her hand, “let’s find the Lodge.”

§

They sat on the ledge of the open window, looking out across the narrow bridge toward the desert. Gehn was asleep in the room behind them.

Anna listened on moment, then smiled. Aitrus sat just behind her, his arms about her, his chin resting on the top of her head. It had been her secret dream to bring him here and sit with him like this, yet now that it was real it seemed more dreamlike than the dream—a moment wholly out of time. She pressed back against him and felt his arms tighten about her.

"Do you still miss him?" he asked softly.

"Sometimes."

She half-turned her head, looking back at him. "He speaks to me sometimes. In my head."

Aitrus smiled, but she could see he only half-believed her, or maybe thought she meant that she thought of her father and remembered his words. But it was true what she said.

She felt Aitrus sigh, a sigh of pure contentment, and turned back, letting her eyes go to the descending moon once more, the smile lingering at the corners of her mouth.

"Ti'ana?"

"Hmm?" she answered lazily.

"I know how much you love to your father, and know how much you owed to him, but… well, what of your mother? You never speak of her."

"No."

Even thought of it brought back the pain.

"Ti'ana?" Aitrus sat forward.

"It's all right," she said.

She began again, hunching forward as she spoke, letting the words come haltingly. "It was an accident. We were climbing. In the mountains to the south of here. my father had gone up the cliff face first, and I had followed. Mother was last, all three of us tied on the same rope. Father had walked on a little way, to inspect the cliffs we had glimpsed from below. That was why we were there, you see. We were always exploring."

Anna stopped, catching her breath. Again she saw it, vividly, as if it had happened not 35 years ago by yesterday—the staring eyes, the mouth open in surprise.

Anna collected herself, then carried on. “The difficult part of the climb was behind her and she was only six or eight from the edge. I could almost have put out a hand and hauled her up. She was smiling. And then her foot slipped. It ought not to have mattered. The rope ought to have held her. I felt a momentary tension on it, then it went, like a rotten vine. And next thing she was falling. And not a sound—just her eyes looking back at me, her mouth open in surprise.

"Father blamed himself, of course. He should have checked the rope, he kept saying, but I could see that he was devastated.”

Aitrus was silent a while. “I am sorry, Ti’ana. I did not know. I should not have asked.”

She turned to face him, kneeling on the ledge. Her face was streaked with tears, but she was smiling tenderly now. She reached out, her hands gently holding his cheeks. “No, Aitrus. You of all people should have known. We should have no secrets, you and I.”

She kissed him then; softly, tenderly, her eyes shining in the moonlight. And as they broke from the kiss, his eyes were wide with wonder.

§

Gehn woke him, shaking him awake. Sunlight blazed in from the room at the front of the lodge, so strong it stabbed into his pupils, making him shielding his eyes then feel about him for his glasses.

“Mama’s gone!” Gehn was saying. “Mama’s gone!”

Aitrus pulled on the glasses, then sat up, putting out his arms to hold the frightened boy. “No, Gehn. She will be back. I promise you.”

But Gehn was sobbing uncontrollably at the thought that he had lost his mother, Aitrus held Gehn tightly until the crying subsided, then, picking him up, he carried him out, through the room at the front until they stood in the doorway, looking out over the valley.

The heat surprised him. It could not be more than an hour since dawn, yet already it was far hotter than the hottest day on Gemedet or Ko’ah. He recalled what Anna had said about the heat; how it was the single factor that determined life here. It was not something he would have written into an Age, but someone, the Grand Master who had written the

Book of Earth, had thought of it, and created the conditions for such extremes of cold and heat.

Gehn had fallen silent, yet he still clung to his father's neck as if his life depended on it. Aitrus looked at him and smiled.

"You want a drink, Gehn?"

Gehn nodded.

Aitrus took his back inside, setting him gently down on the window ledge while he poured him a goblet of cool, clear water from the jug Anna had filled the night before.

Turning, he saw how Gehn was staring about him. "Where are we?" he asked, taking the water gratefully.

"This is where your mother lived when she was young," he answered. "This is where she grew up, with her father."

"Here?" Gehn seemed astonished. "But where are the Books?"

Aitrus laughed. "These people are human. They are not like the D'ni. They do not have Books and Ages. This is all they have."

Gehn wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, then looked up at Aitrus. "But how could they live with just this?"

Aitrus looked about him. To be honest, he had asked himself the very same question. Now that he had seen the Lodge, he wondered how Anna had survived out here.

"They made do," he answered, finally. Yet even as he said it he heard Anna's voice. She was singing. A song he had never heard before, in a tongue he did not know.

Quickly he joined Gehn at the window, in time to see Anna come over the crest of the hill, a small cart pushed before her. She was wearing a black cloak trimmed with red, the hood of which was up over her head. Seeing them, she waved, then came on again, finishing her song.

Aitrus went out onto the bridge, Gehn beside him. The heat was fierce but not yet overpowering. As Anna came up onto the bridge, she smiled and held out something for Gehn to take. He ran to her and took the strange box, then scuttled back inside, into the shade. Anna pulled back her hood, then stepped up to Aitrus.

"You should wear something on your head," she said, touching his brow. "Ten minutes in this and you will get sun-stroke."

"Sunstroke?" He did not understand her.

“The heat,” she said. “It will affect your brain. You will collapse and be ill.”

“You are jesting with me,” he said, smiling, as if he understood she was joking, but she was not smiling.

“It is very dangerous out here,” she said simply. “Both you and Gehn must keep covered up as much as possible. The desert sun is unforgiving.”

He nodded, then. “Where have you been? And that cart…”

Anna half-turned, looking across at the cart, then she turned back to Aitrus. “I went to get it. It had all my books and journals on it. And other things. Fortunately I hid it well, and the desert did the rest. It was untouched, as if I’d left it yesterday.”

“And that song. What was that?”

Anna smiled. “Did you like it?” She quickly sang a verse. “It’s something my mother taught me. I could not sing it before. But now…” Again she smiled, then took his arm, leading him back into the shadows of the Lodge.

As they came into the main room, Gehn looked up at them, his eyes wide. “What is this game?” he asked, pointing to the checkered board, the black and white pieces that were laid out beside it.

“It is called chess,” she said, squatting beside him. “My father taught me how to play, and I shall teach you.”

Gehn beamed. “So I am not going to go to the Guild Hall after all?”

Anna looked down. “No, Gehn. You must go. But not yet. We will stay here for a few days, yes? Just you and I and Father.”

Gehn looked away a moment, struggling with his disappointment, then he nodded and, turning back to Anna, picked up the white queen. “So what is this piece and what does it do?”

§

“Thinblood…”

“Who-man…”

“No-dunny…”

The whispers surrounded Gehn in the darkness of the dormitory; endless, taunting whispers that filled the lonely nights. Gehn lay there, facing the bare stone wall, the knuckles of his right hand pressed into his mouth, trying to shut it all out, but still the whispers came.

The mattress was too thin beneath him, the blankets rough and scratchy. But worst of all was the sense of abandonment that came each evening as the great door to the dormitory was closed and absolute darkness fell.

It was awful. More awful than he had ever thought possible. They had heard him crying the first few nights and had laughed at him for it. And then the whispers had begun, playing upon his fears and insecurity, making his life even more of a misery than it already was.

At home he was used to his own room, his own smooth sheets and blankets. There, a night-light rested in the corner, warm and reassuring. And he knew that his mother was always there, next door, in case bad dreams came and disturbed his sleep. But here there was nothing. Nothing but the darkness and the endless hurtful whispers.

Why had they done this to him? Why? Had he been bad? If so, he could not remember what it was that he had done. Or did they no longer love him? For to leave him here, among these awful, spiteful boys, was surely some kind of punishment.

He could remember his father's face, unnaturally stern, as he spoke to him the night before he had come here.

"You must be brave, Gehn. It is the D'ni way. It might seem hard at first, but you will get used to it, I promise you."

So much for promises. But the worst had been the parting from his mother. He had kicked and screamed, refusing to go with them, so that eventually they had had to pick him up and carry him to the waiting carriage.

That had been two weeks ago now. Two weeks of endless homesickness, and the torment of the nights.

Yet even as the whispers multiplied, Gehn found himself thinking of the lesson earlier that day. He had begun to think himself a fool; had begun to believe that the boys were right when they called him "No-dunny" and said he had sand in his head instead of brains. But today he had begun to understand what he was doing here, for today he had seen Master Urren.

Gehn was taught in a group of eight, the eldest aged seven, the youngest himself. Most of it was basic, the kind of stuff his mother had taught him back at home, but some was specific stuff about ink and writing; today's lecture in particular.

Master Urren, the visiting tutor from the Guild of Ink-Makers, was a big, ungainly, birdlike man, with a long, thin face and huge bushy eyebrows that seemed to form a continuous line across his upper face. He had the habit of staring into the air as he spoke, as if in a trance, then looking directly at one or other of his pupils, startling them. But it was not this habit but his words that had woken Gehn this morning.

With his eyes closed, Gehn could see Master Urren now, his right hand clenched into a fist as he spoke the Ink-Maker's litany.

"What binds the Word to the World? The Ink!"

"What burns the bridge between the Ages? The Ink!"

"What forms the living darkness between two lights? The Ink!"

Then, to the astonishment of them all, he had brought out a great tub of ink—lifting a handful of the fine dark granules so that they could see.

"The manufacture of this is a secret. A very grave and great secret, like the secret of the paper, which in time each of *you* will learn. But you must first prove yourself worthy to be trusted with such a secret, for the making of these two things is the key to immense power—the power to make worlds!"

And there was more, the words issuing thunderously from Urren's lips, so that Gehn had found himself staring at the guildsman openmouthed, amazed by the power of the words. This, he realized, was what his father had been talking about. This was what it meant to be a guildsman. Until that moment he had thought it a senseless thing to want to be, but suddenly, in one single, blazing moment, he understood.

Gehn turned and lay upon his back, letting his hand fall onto his chest. The whispers had stopped now. Soft snoring filled the silent darkness of the narrow room.

Secrets. He was to be the heir to great and wonderful secrets. Twenty years it might take, but then he would know, as Master Urren knew, and maybe then his eyes would burn with that same ferocious knowledge, that same certainty.

Gehn shivered, then, wiping his hand across his face, formed the words silently in the darkness.

It is the D’ni way.

§

The Ink-works were burning. Great flames curled up into the darkness, lighting the roof of the cavern almost a mile overhead. Gehn stood on the stone ledge, staring out the window across the rooftops of the upper city. Surrounding him, his fellow students jostled to see, but he stood at the very front, both hands tightly grasping the great central bar of the pane-less window, looking out across the dark toward the massive blaze.

They had heard the explosion twenty minutes back, but at the time they had not understood just what was happening. Now they knew. Someone had placed a bomb in the very middle of the Ink-Works. Many were dead. Many more were missing.

For the past eight weeks there had been incidents. Senior guildsmen had been mysteriously attacked. Offices had been ransacked. In the worst of the incidents, three Kortee-nea—blank Books—had gone missing, along with a whole stock of small Linking Books. The Maintainers had been placed on constant alert; no one knew yet who was behind the outbreak.

And now this.

There was a shout in the corridor behind them. Gehn turned, along with the others, to see the Duty Master hurrying down the corridor toward them, his hands waving madly.

“Boys! Boys! Get down from there at once!”

They climbed down, obedient to their Guild Master, yet as Gehn went to walk away, he saw how the Master hung back at the window, staring out at the blaze, the glowing orange light reflected in his pale eyes, a look of pure fear etched in his face.

§

Aitrus did not wait to be summoned but went straight to the Guild House. All but two or three of the Emergency Council were already there, the others arriving very shortly after Aitrus. As Lord R'hira called the meeting to order, a Master from the Guild of Maintainers hurried in and, bowing to R'hira, gave him the latest report from the Ink-Works.

And fifteen had died. Another eight were missing. It was too early to know for certain, but it seemed that a large stock of ink had been taken.

"But how was this possible?" Master Jadaris asked, when his man had finished.

"Someone is linking to places throughout D'ni," Guild Master Jerahl answered him. "Someone with special knowledge of the guilds."

"Some*one*?" R'hira queried, looking about the table. "Or are there several miscreants? Look at the pattern of the attacks. Not one but six separate guilds have now been targeted. And who knows where they will strike next? The only thing these incidents have in common is that they know the intimate workings of the guilds. They know where we are vulnerable. They know precisely where to attack and when."

"Veovis?"

All eyes turned to Aitrus, who had spoken the name.

"Impossible," Jadaris said, after a moment. "He is more than safe where we have put him."

"Is he?" Lord R'hira asked, leaning toward the Grand Master. "When did you last check on him?"

"Three weeks ago. After the first of these incidents."

"But before the remainder, yes?"

Jadaris nodded. Then, shaking his head, "No. I refuse to believe it. But if my fellow guildsmen would like me to check?"

"Do so, Master Jadaris," R'hira said. "And let us know what you discover."

Jadaris bowed to R'hira and left.

R'hira looked about the table. "Whoever this is—and we must not leap to *any* assumptions without full and proper knowledge—they aim to create a climate of fear, and what better way than to engage in a meaningless sequence of violent events?"

"Do you think that is what's happening here?" Master Jerahl asked.

“I do. But there is something none of you know about. Something that has been kept a secret among the Five. In view of this latest outrage, however, we feel you ought to know if it.” R’hira paused significantly, then, looking down at his hands, said, “One of the Five great Books has been desecrated. That of Master Talashar. In fact, the structure of the text was so damaged and distorted that that Age has become unstable and we fear it will shortly self-destruct.”

There was horror about the table. This was one of their worst fears —that their Ages would be tampered with and destroyed. And here was news that such a thing had happened, and not just to any Age but to one of the five “Classics,” those ancient, beautiful Ages made by the greatest of D’ni’s Writers.

“Who would do such a thing?” Hajihr of the Stone-Masons asked, his face mirroring the shock everyone felt at that moment.

“I do not know for certain,” R’hira answered, “But I am beginning to have my suspicions. If it *is* Veovis, then I’d judge he is not acting alone. And there it is one other thing. The new entries were in the same hand as that of Master Talashar.”

“But he died more than six thousand years ago,” Jerahl said, voicing the thoughts of all.

“That is so,” R’hira said. “Yet the ink on the page was barely three weeks old.”

There was a stunned silence, then Aitrus spoke again. “I think we should find A’Gaeris and hold him, until his part in this is fully known.”

“You think *he* is involved, then?” Hajihr asked.

Aitrus shrugged. “He may be innocent, but I think not. I begin to share my Lord R’hira’s doubts.”

“And Veovis?” Jerahl asked, looking across at Aitrus.

“Perhaps Lord Veovis was innocent after all.”

§

Guild Master Jadaris paused at the outer gate, waiting as the Master of the Keys unlocked the ancient door that led down into the earth.

No part of D’ni lay deeper in the rock than this, no part of the great city in the rock was more secure. A sloping tunnel led from the inner gate

down to the Gate of Traitors, ten spans into the rock. There, in a cavern that had been hollowed more than 3,000 years before, lay the Cells of Entry.

Jadaris walked down the long passage between the cells. All but one were empty. So it was. For though there were fifteen cells beyond the inner gate, few were ever used, for D'ni was an orderly society and transgressions that merited incarceration on a Prison Age were rare indeed.

"He *must* be there," he muttered to himself as, standing before the solid stone door of Veovis's cell, he waited for the Master of the keys to unlock.

But R'hira's words had rattled him. Lord R'hira did not act on whim. If *he* had a suspicion, then like as not it was the truth. Even so, he could not believe that Veovis was not in the Age.

As the door swung back, he pushed past his Key Master almost rudely, so anxious was he for confirmation one way or another.

The cell was bare, the walls plain rock. A single wooden chair and a table were the only furnishings.

The book, allowing one to monitor the Prison Age, lay on the desk, open, its glowing panel visible.

Jadaris leaned over it. The panel showed no sign of Veovis at his desk in the Prison Age.

He turned, looking back at the squad of guards who had followed him and nodded.

"We go in."

§

Master Jadaris appeared in a room of metal. The floor of the linking chamber was slatted black metal, the six walls a metallic blue that was almost black, undecorated and windowless, featureless almost, except for one large panel on the far wall facing him. Dim lighting panels in the ceiling gave the room an underwater feel. In the center of the floor was a hexagonal pedestal, on which rested the Linking Book. It appeared untouched.

More men were linking into the room now. Armed Maintainers, wearing sealed masks and carrying air tanks on their backs, ready for any sort of trouble.

As Jadaris stood, the armed men positioned themselves along the walls to other side of him. At Jadaris's signal, his first assistant stepped up to the panel and placed a flat "locking square" against the faint indentation in the panel, then stepped back.

There was a heavy *thunk!* as all six of the steel locking bolts retracted at once. With a hiss the door slid slowly into the floor.

Cold air flooded the room. Beyond the door and metal walkway ran on. Jadaris sniffed again, an expression of acute distaste in his face, then walked toward the doorway.

Stepping out onto the walkway he looked up. This guy was dark and glowering, a wintry sun obscured behind heavy cloud.

Facing him was the island. Jadaris stared at it, wondering what Veovis had thought the first time he had seen it, knowing that this was to be his home henceforth, until he died.

The island was a great block of black volcanic rock, its tapered shape thrusting up from a black and oily sea. Standing on top of that desolate rock was a black tower, its walls smooth and windowless. The walkway was an unsupported length of metal some five or six feet above the surface, joining the linking chamber to the island. A set of steps cut from the rock lead up from the walkway to the great door of the tower.

A cold, bleak wind blew from Jadaris's left, whipping the surface of the water and making him pull his cloak tighter about him.

"Come," he said, half-turning to his men, "let us see what is to be seen."

The great door was locked. As his Chief Jailer took the key from his belt and stepped up to fit it to the lock, Jadaris shook his head. It was not possible. It simply was not possible. Yet as they went from room to room in the tower, his certainty dissolved. In the top room was a table. On it they found a meal set out. Yet the meal had been abandoned weeks ago and lay there rotting. Beside it lay three Linking Books.

Jadaris took the first of the three Books and stared at it. He did not know how it had been done, but Veovis had been sprung.

He shivered. This whole business filled him with profound misgivings. It was hard to know just who to trust.

He opened the Linking Book and read a line or two. This one led straight back to D'ni. Or so it seemed. It would be easy to check—he could send one of his guards through—but that was not the way they normally did things. It was not guild practice to send a man through to any Age without a Linking Book to get them back.

Jadaris sat there a moment, staring at the words, his eyes unseeing, his thoughts elsewhere, then suddenly he stood. Sweeping the rotting meal onto the floor, he lay the Book down in its place and opened it to the descriptive panel. Then, looking about him at his men, Jadaris smiled and placed his hand down firmly on the panel.

§

There was the acrid taste of smoke in the air as Veovis, cloaked and headed, made his way it along the alleyway toward the gate. The narrow streets of the lower city were strangely crowded for this late hour, as people stood outside their houses to watch the guildsman fight the great blaze farther up the city. The light from that blaze flickered moistly in Veovis's eyes as he walked along, but no one noticed a single figure passing among them. Great events were happening in the cavern. They had all heard the explosion, and rumor was even now filtering down from the upper city. Guildsmen were dead. Some said as many as a hundred.

Stepping out from under the gate, Veovis glanced up at the blaze. It was still some way above him into his left. A muscle twitch to at his cheek, then lay still. The guard at the gate had barely glanced at him as he passed, his attention drawn to the fire at the great Ink-Works. And so he walked on, passing like a shadow among that preoccupied crowd.

The gate to the upper city just lay ahead.

§

Anna pulled on her boots, then stood, looking about her at the room. A cloak. Yes. She would need to take a cloak for him.

Going over to the linen cupboard, she took down one of Gehn's cloaks. Then, knowing that if she thought too long about it she might change her mind, she quickly left the room, hurrying down the hallway and out the front door.

Outside Anna paused, her eyes going straight to the blaze. It was below her and slightly to the left of where she stood. What it meant for D'ni she did not know, but the sight of it had finally made up her mind. She was going to bring Gehn home, whether Aitrus liked it or not. This had gone on for too long.

She hurried through the streets, yet as she came into the lane that led to the Guild Hall, she found it barricaded, a squad of Maintainers keeping back a small crowd of bystanders. Even so, she went across, begging to be allowed to pass, but the guards would not let her and eventually she turned, making her way back along the street, wondering if there might not be another way to get to the Hall.

Down. If she went down to the gate and then across, she might come at the Hall by a different way

She walked on, making for the gate, yet as she did, a man strode toward her. He was cloaked and hooded and kept his head down as he walked, as if heavily preoccupied. There was something strange about that, and as he brushed past her, she caught a glimpse of his eyes beneath the hood.

She turned, astonished.

Veovis! It had been Veovis!

No. It could not be.

Anna swallowed, then, taking two steps, called out to the man. "Sir?"

But the man did not stop. He went on, hastening his pace, disappearing into a side street.

Anna hesitated a moment, then hurried after.

Turning the corner, she thought for a moment she had lost him; then she glimpsed a shadowy figure at the end of the narrow lane, slipping into the side gate of a darkened mansion.

Anna stopped, looking about her, but the lane was empty. If she was to find out what was happening she would have to do it herself.

Slowly, almost tentatively, she approached the gate. The blaze was at her back now. In its light everything was cast in vivid shadows of orange

and black. There was a padlock on the gate, but it had been snapped and now hung loose. Anna Lee and her weight gently on the door and pushed.

Inside was a tiny yard, enclosed by walls. A door on the far side was open. Anna went across and stood in the doorway, listening. Again she could hear nothing. She slipped inside, into what was clearly a kitchen. The house was dark, abandoned, or, more likely, boarded up. Only the glow of the distance fire lit the room, giving each coverage shape a wavering insubstantiality.

She crossed the room, her footsteps barely audible. A door led onto the great hallway of the mansion. The body of the hall was dark, but on the far side was a huge staircase, leading up to the next floor. A great window on the landing let in the pale red glow of the blaze.

Anna listened a moment, then frowned. Perhaps she had imagined it. Perhaps he had not come in here at all. After all, it was dark, and she had been quite some distance off.

Briefly she wondered whose house this was and why it was abandoned. There were portraits on the walls, but most were in heavy shadow, all detail obscured. Only one, on the landing wall right next to the great window, could be discerned with any clarity, yet even that, in the wavering glow, seemed just a head and shoulders. It could have been anyone. Anyone at all.

Across from her, on the far side of the hallway, were more rooms. She quickly went across and peered inside, into the intense darkness, listening as much as looking. Again there was nothing.

She was about to go, to give up her fruitless search, when there was a distinct noise from the room overhead; a thump of something being put down; a heavy noise of metal and wood.

Anna felt her heartbeat quicken. She should not be here. Not alone, anyway. If it was Veovis, then he had escaped. And if he *had* escaped…

She was in danger—she knew that for a certainty—but she could not stop herself. Not now. The spirit of exploration was upon her. She had to know if it really *was* him, and if so, what he was doing.

She went to the foot of the stairs, staring up past the turn. Was there a faint light up there or was she imagining it?

Slowly Anna began to climb the stairs, ready at any moment to rush down and out of the great house. There were more noises now; the sounds of someone taking things and stowing them—in a sack, perhaps, or

a bag. At the turn of the stairs she stopped, glancing up at the portrait. She was about to go on, when she looked again at the painting, sudden understanding coming to her.

It was A'Gaeris, or one of his ancestors so like him as to make no difference. The figure had the same querulous eyes, the same long brow and receding hairline, the same swept-back hair.

So this was your mansion once, Philosopher. Before you fell.

The knowledge was a key. She knew now that it was Veovis up above, and that A'Gaeris had somehow helped him to escape. How she did not know just yet, but perhaps she would discover that, given time.

Anna client the last few stairs, then stopped her hand on the top rail, listening once more. The noises were coming from a room at the far end of the hallway—to her left as she stood. All the doors to the right of the corridor were shut, so it was not the light of the blaze she had seen from below. It came, in fact, from a room just up the corridor and to the left.

Anna took a long, calming breath then began to walk toward it. But she had gone only two paces when Veovis stepped from the room at the far end of the corridor and placed a backpack down on the floor of the hallway. She stopped dead, certain he would see her, but he did not even glance her way. With a sniff he turned and went back inside.

She quietly let out a breath, then walked on.

In the doorway to the first room she stopped, steering and down the hallway to the door of the end room, certain that he would step out at that moment and see her, but then she heard him, whistling softly to himself, his footsteps clearly on the far side of the room.

She turned and looked inside. It was a study. Book-filled shelves were on every wall and a huge desk sat in the far corner. On it was a tiny lamp with a pale rose bulb of glass, let by a fire-marble. In its glow she could see the outline of a Linking Book, the descriptive panel shining brightly.

For a moment she hesitated, then, walking across, she stood beside the desk and, putting out her hand, placed it on the panel.

§

Veovis crouched, tying the neck of the sack, then carried it outside. Lifting the backpack, he slung it over his shoulder then went along the hallway to the study.

All was as he had left it. He glanced about the study, then reached across and slid the catch back on the lamp, dousing the fire-marble. Slowly its glow faded. As the room darkened, the brightness of the panel in the Linking Book seemed to intensify, until he seemed to be looking through a tiny window.

Reaching out, Veovis covered that brightness with his hand, as if to extinguish it. For a moment the room was dark; then, slowly, the vivid square of light reappeared through the melting shape of his hand.

There was silence in the empty room.

§

Anna stood at the window looking out at a view that was as strange as any she had ever seen. It was not simply that the sky had a heavy purplish hue, nor that the dark green sea seemed to move slowly, viscously, like oil in a bowl, it was the smell of this Age—an awful musty smell that seemed to underlie everything.

The chamber into which she had linked had been cut into the base of the island, forming a kind of cellar beneath it. Knowing that Veovis was likely to link after her, she had quickly left the room, hurrying up a flight of twisting metals stairs and into a gallery that looked out through strong glass windows on an underwater seascape filled with strange, sluggish creatures, dark-skinned, with pale red eyes and stunted fans.

Halfway along this gallery, facing the windows, was a large, circular metal hatch—wheel-operated, as on a ship. Anna glanced at it, then went on.

A second set of steps led up from the gallery into a spacious nest of rooms, at the center of which was a six-sided chamber—a study of some kind. Two of the walls were filled floor to ceiling with shelves, on which were books. Further piles of ancient, leather-covered books were scattered here into there across the wooden floor, as if dumped there carelessly. A dozen or so large, unmarked crates were stacked against the bare stone walls on one side, next to one of the three doors that led from

the room. Two large desks had been pushed together at the center. These were covered with all manner of clutter, including several detailed maps of D'ni—street plans and diagrams of the sewers and service runs. In the far corner of the room a golden cage hung by a strong chain from a low ceiling. In it was a cruel-looking hunting bird. Seeing Anna it had lifted its night-black, glossy wings as if to launch itself that her, then settled again, its fierce eyes blinking from time to time as it studied her watchfully.

A long, dark corridor led from the nest of rooms to the chamber in which she stood, which lay at a corner of the island. It was a strange room, its outer walls and sloping ceiling made entirely of glass panels. Through the glass overhead she could see even more rooms and balconies, climbing the island, tier after tier.

Like K'veer, she thought, wondering if Veovis had had a hand in its design.

At the very top of the island, or, rather, level with it, she could glimpse the pinnacle of the tower, poking up of the very center of the rock.

Anna turned from the window. Behind her were three doors. The first led to a continuation of the corridor; the second opened upon a tiny store room; the third went directly into the rock— perhaps to the tower itself.

She went across, opening the last of the doors. A twisting stone stairwell led up into the rock. She was about to venture up it when there was a noise from the rooms to her right. There was a thud as something heavy was put down, then the unmistakable sound of Veovis whistling to himself. That whistling now grew louder.

Anna closed the door quietly and hurried over the middle door. She could explore the stairwell later. Right now it mattered only that Veovis not find her there.

Slipping into the store room, she pulled the door closed behind her, even as Veovis's footsteps came along the final stretch of the corridor and into the room beside where she hid.

§

Aitrus took off his cloak, then turned to face his mother.

"What is it?" he asked.

“It is Ti’ana,” she answered. “I do not know where she is, Aitrus. One of the servants saw her leave an hour back.”

“She went out? With things as they are?”

Tasera nodded. “I would have sent a man out after her, if I had known. But she left no message.”

Aitrus frowned. “Wait here,” he said, “I think I know where she might be.”

“You know?”

“Not for certain, but Ti’ana has been unhappy these past few months. She has missed Gehn badly.”

“We have all missed him.”

“Yes, but Ti’ana has missed him more than anyone. Last week she asked me if he could come home. I think she may have gone to fetch him.”

“They would not let her.”

“Do you think that would stop Ti’ana if she were determined on it?”

Tasera shook her head.

“Well, I will go and see. Wait here, Mother. If she is not at the Guild Hall I shall return at once. But do not worry. I am sure she is all right.”

§

One of the guards on the barricade remembered her.

“She was most persistent,” he said, “but we had strict orders. We were to let no one pass, not even guildsmen, without special notification. She left here, oh, more than an hour ago now.”

“Did you notice where she went?”

The young guard nodded, then pointed up the lane. “She went back the way she came, then turned left, under the arch. It looked as if she was heading for the western sector.”

Aitrus thanked the guard then turned away. If Anna had been going home, she would have walked straight on and cut through farther up. Unless, of course, she was trying to get through to the Guild Hall by another route.

“Home,” he told himself. He would check home first, just in case she had returned. Then, if she was not there, he would go to the Guild House and ask there.

§

Anna crouched against the wall, trying not to make a sound.

Veovis was just beyond the door. She had heard him stop and sniff the air.

“Strange,” she heard him say. “Very strange.”

She closed her eyes. At any moment he would pull back the door and see her there. And then…

His footsteps went on. She heard the door to the corridor creak open, then close behind him, his footsteps receding.

Anna took a long breath, then pushed the door ajar. The outer room was empty now, filled with the strange mauve light from the sky. She was about to step outside again when she glimpsed, just to her right, two shelves, cut deep into the wall. She had not noticed them before, but now she stepped across, amazed by what was on them.

Books! Linking Books! Dozens of them! She took one down and examined it. D’ni! This linked to D’ni! Quickly she examined another. That, too, appeared to link to D’ni. One after another she flicked through them.

All of them on the top shelf—every last one—seemed to link back to D’ni; each at a separate location: in a specific room in a Guild Hall, or in the cellar of a house; in storerooms and servants’ quarters; and one, audaciously, direct into the great Council chamber of the Guild House.

So *this* was how they did it! Veovis was behind the spate of incidents these past few weeks.

Veovis, yes…and A’Gaeris.

The Books on the bottom shelf were blanks, waiting to be used. She counted them. There were forty-eight.

Anna stared at them, perplexed. How had they managed to get hold of so many blank Books? Had Suahrnir provided them? And what of Suahrnir? He had disappeared five years ago, presumed dead, but was he here, too?

When she had linked through she had not been quite sure what she meant to do. To take a peek and then get back? But now that she had seen the Books…

I have to stop this, she thought. Fifteen dead. That's what the guard said. And more will die, for certain, unless I act. Unless I stop this now.

But how?

Anna stared at the Books, then nodded to herself, a plan beginning to form in her head.

§

Veovis stood at the end of the stone jetty, his left hand resting lightly on the plinth as he looked out over the glutinously bright green sea toward a nearby rock that jutted, purest white like an enameled tooth, from its surface. A circular platform rested on that rock, as if fused onto its jagged crown, its gray-blue surface level with where Veovis stood.

Veovis glanced at the timer on his wrist, then slowly turned the dial beneath his fingers, clockwise, then counterclockwise, then clockwise again. He waited a moment, listening as the massive cogs fell into place beneath his feet, then pressed down on the dial.

Slowly a metal walkway slid from the stone beneath his feet, bridging the narrow channel, linking the jetty to the platform. There was a resounding *chunk!* as it locked in place.

Veovis waited, tense now, resisting the temptation to glance at his timer again. Then, shimmering into view, a figure formed in the air above the platform. It was A'Gaeris.

The Philosopher blinked and glanced up at the sky, as if disoriented, then looked across at Veovis and grinned, holding up the Linking Book that both Anna and Veovis had used; that, until five minutes ago, had rested in the study back in the boarded-up house in D'ni.

The two men met in the middle of the walkway, clasping each other about the shoulders like the dearest of friends, while behind them a third figure shimmered into being on the platform.

It was Suahrnir.

§

High above them, from where she stood at the north window of the tower, Anna looked on, watching the three men greet each other then turn and walk back along the jetty, Veovis and A'Gaeris side by side, Suahrnir following a pace or two behind.

She had been thinking all along of the Linking Book back on D'ni—asking herself why they should leave the back door to this Age open like that. But now she understood. A'Gaeris had come along behind Veovis and gathered up the Book, then used a second Linking Book, hidden elsewhere, no doubt, to link back to the rock.

The walkway had been retracted. If anyone now tried to link through to this Age they would be trapped on the rock, unable to get across to the island.

She stepped back, away from the window, then turned, looking about her. The big circular room seemed to be used as a laboratory of some kind. Three long wooden benches were formed into an **H** at the center, their surfaces scattered with gleaming brass equipment. Broad shelves on the long, curving walls contained endless glass bottles and stoppered jars of chemicals and powders, and, on a separate set of shelves, Books. *Guild* Books, she realized, stolen from the libraries of D'ni.

Anna walked across, picking things up and examining them. Coming to the window on the south side of the room, she looked out. The sea went flat to the horizon, its dark green shading into black, so that at the point where the sea met the pale mauve sky there seemed to be a gap in reality.

Just below the tower, the land dipped steeply away to meet the sea, but in one place it had been built up slightly so that a buttress of dark, polished rock thrust out into the sea. A kind of tunnel extended a little way from the end of that buttress, at the end of which was a cage; a big, mansized cage, partly submerged.

Looking at it, Anna frowned.

She turned, looking back across the room. There was only one doorway into the room, only one stairway down. The strong wooden door had a single bolt, high up, which could be drawn from inside.

“Perfect,” she said quietly, smiling to herself. “Absolutely perfect.”

§

Back inside the study, Veovis shut the door, then walked across. A’Gaeris and Suahrnir were already deep in conversation, pointing to locations on the map and debating which to strike at next.

Veovis stared at them a moment, then walked around past them and picked up one of the two bags he had brought with him from D’ni.

“Here,” he said, handing it to A’Gaeris, “I brought you a few things back this time.”

A’Gaeris looked inside the bag, then laughed. Taking out the cloak, he held it up. It was a guild cloak, edged in the dark red of the Guild of Writers.

“To think I once valued this above all else!”

A’Gaeris shook his head, making a noise of disgust, then threw the cloak about his shoulders casually, preening himself in a mocking fashion and looking to Veovis as he did.

“So how *are* things in D’ni?”

Veovis smiled. “You were right, Philosopher. The destruction of the Ink-Works has unnerved them. Before now they were able to keep things close. Now all of D’ni knows there is a problem.”

“That may be so,” Suahrnir said, “but there is another problem. They now know that you are no longer on the Prison Age.”

Veovis turned to him. “They *know?*”

Suahrnir nodded. “I overheard two guards talking. It seems Master Jadaris himself took an expedition in to check that you were still there. Finding you gone, they will know that someone had to have sprung you.” He turned to A’Gaeris and grinned. “And they will not have far to look, will they?”

A’Gaeris turned back to Veovis, concerned. “Then we must escalate our campaign. Until now we have had the advantage of surprise, but they will be vigilant from here on. We must identify our prime targets and hit them.”

“Lord R’hira,” Suahrnir suggested.

“Naturally,” Veovis agreed. “But not first. First we deal with my meddlesome friend.”

“Your friend?” A’Gaeris looked puzzled.

“My ex-friend, then. Guild Master Aitrus.”

“Aitrus?” Suahrnir frowned. “But surely we can deal with him later?”

“No,” A’Gaeris said. “What Veovis suggests makes sense. Cut off the head and the body cannot fight on. And who are the men whom we might call the ‘head’ of D’ni? Why, the Emergency Council, of course! Aitrus, Jadaris, Yf’Jerrej, R’hira. These are the four who are really running things right now, and so they must be our primary targets. Thus far we have unnerved the guilds. Now we must destabilize them.”

“I agree,” Veovis said. “But you will leave Aitrus to me.”

A’Gaeris smiled. “If you want him, he is yours, my friend. But make no mistakes. And show no pity. Remember that he showed you none.”

Veovis nodded. “I will not forget that easily. But come, let us formulate our plans.”

§

Anna tiptoed partway along the corridor, then stopped. She could hear the faint murmur of their voices through the door. There was brief laughter, and then the talk went on.

Good. While they were occupied, she would move the Linking Books.

Returning to the room, she gathered up all she could carry at one go, then hurried up the tower steps. Three trips saw all of the books removed to the big room at the top of the tower. Satisfied, Anna cleared the surface of one of the benches, then began to pile the books up in a heap, leaving only one aside.

That’s done, Anna picked up the book she had set aside and returned to the door.

The easiest and quickest way was to burn the books—to set fire to them, then link straight back to D’ni—but the easiest was not always the best. If she was to be sure of damaging their plans, she would need to

make certain that there were no more Linking Books elsewhere on the island.

Anna listened a moment, then, satisfied that there was no one on the stairs, slipped out and hurried down. She had been depending on surprise so far, but she would need luck now, too, if she was to succeed.

Her luck held. They were still there inside the study. She could hear their voices murmuring behind the door.

"All right," a voice, Suahrnir's, said angrily. "But I do not know why we cannot just kill him and be done with it!"

Anna stepped back. At any moment the door might open and she would be discovered, yet she stayed there, listening.

"I'll go right now," Veovis said clearly. "Unless you have any further objections?"

"Not I," A'Gaeris said. "But hurry back. There's much to do before the morning."

"Do not worry," Veovis answered sardonically. "I know how best to hook our friend. I shall take no longer than I must."

§

Aitrus sat at his desk in his rooms at the Guild Hall, in despair, his head in his hands. There was no sign of Anna. A search of the upper city had not found her. All inquiries had drawn a blank. And though Master Jadaris had agreed to make a more thorough search, Aitrus knew that they would not find her. Not in D'ni, anyway.

No, Veovis was somehow behind this. He had to be. And this was his revenge—to take Anna.

But what had he done with her?

Aitrus looked up, staring into the air, trying to think.

If he were Veovis, what would he want? Justice? No. It was far too late for justice. Vengeance? Yes, but not simply vengeance; at least, not the blind, uncaring kind that madmen seek, unless the isolation of the prison rock had sent Veovis mad.

No. He could not believe that. Veovis was stronger than that.

Perhaps, but what of A'Gaeris? What was his role in all this? And how had he persuaded Veovis to ally with him against the Guilds?

Betrayal. That was the seed A'Gaeris had planted in Veovis's mind. *Betrayal*. The guilds had betrayed Veovis, as they had once betrayed A'Gaeris. And now the guilds had to be punished.

Punished…or destroyed?

Aitrus stood, realizing that there was only one thing to do. They would have to search every inch of D'ni for Linking Books.

"If we can find out where he is linking back to…"

Aitrus looked up. Footsteps. There were footsteps farther down the hall.

He went out into the hallway.

"Ti'ana?...Ti'ana, is that you?"

Aitrus had barely gone two or three steps when the door at the far end of the hall swung open. He stopped dead.

"Veovis?"

Veovis stood there, smiling, a Linking Book held open in one hand.

"Yes, Aitrus, *dearest* friend. I have your wife. If you want her back, you had better follow me. And no tricks, or Ti'ana will die."

"No! Wait!"

Aitrus started toward him, yet even as he did, Veovis brought his other hand across, touching the glowing panel.

"Veovis!"

The Book fell to the floor.

So it was true. His darkest thoughts were thus confirmed. Walking across, he bent down and picked up the Book.

Help. Common sense told him he ought to get help.

But what if Veovis meant what he said?

Then common sense would kill his beloved wife.

"No choice," he said, as if to excuse himself. Then, sensing that only ill could come of it, he lay his hand upon the panel and linked.

§

Downstairs the door slammed shut. There were footsteps on the stairs. A moment later A'Gaeris appeared at the top of the stairs, looking about him. Seeing the Linking Book he smiled, then he went across and

bent, picking it up. For a moment he studied the glowing panel, his smile broadening; pocketing the Book, he turned and went back down the stairs.

It was time to link back to the island.

§

Anna slipped through the open doorway and into the dimly lit chamber. To her right was the study. Through its thin, wooden walls she could hear the low murmur of two voices—those of A'Gaeris and Suahrnir.

She sighed. It looked as if she was never going to get the chance to search the study.

Anna turned, looking about her. There was a narrow bed in one corner of the room. Beside it, against the back wall, were a small desk and chair. A worn silk coverlet lay over the bed. On the desk were a number of thin, coverless books, like child's exercise books. She picked one up and opened it. It was one of A'Gaeris's pamphlets—one of his endless ranting tirades against the guilds that had won him notoriety, mainly in the lower city.

Putting the pamphlet aside, Anna quickly examined what else was on the surface. There was a small notebook, locked, she noted, with a tiny silver clasp. A D'ni symbol—a simplification of A'Gaeris's name—was burned into the leather of the cover. She picked it up and pocketed it. Beneath it, to her surprise, was a tiny picture in a gilded frame. It showed a young woman, barely Anna's own age by the look of her, her dark hair swept back from a stunningly beautiful face.

That, too, she pocketed.

Anna turned, looking about her once more, checking that there was nothing else—no hidden panels and no hatches in the floor. Satisfied, she hurried back across the room again, meaning to make her way back to the tower.

She had delayed too long. Every moment now increased the chance of her being discovered. Best, then, to cut her losses: to go back to the room at the top of the tower and burn the Linking Books she had.

It would be a start. Besides, she knew much now about their plans. If she could reach Master Jadaris with that knowledge…

There was a sudden noise behind her, a buzz of voices from the central room. Veovis had returned. She heard his voice giving hasty orders. Then there was a strange grunt and the thud of a body falling to the floor.

There were other noises—scraping and scratching noises that she could make no sense of—and then Veovis spoke again, much louder this time.

“Take him down into the cellar. We’ll put him in the cage. I’ll use him as bait for another, much more tasty fish.”

There was laughter, unwholesome laughter, and then the sound of a body being dragged across the room.

So they had taken another guildsman.

The corridor that led to the cellar was on the other side. For the moment she was in no danger of discovery. But time was running out. It was time to prepare things. Time to bait her own trap.

§

Back in the top room of the tower, Anna began to search the shelves. She knew what she wanted: potassium nitrate, sulphur, carbon; some liquid paraffin, a length of wick; a tinderbox.

The bottles were labeled, each with a handwritten D’ni symbol, but she glanced at these only to confirm what her eyes already told her. She took the tiny bottles down, one after another, setting them side by side on the worktop, then took a mixing dish and a metal spoon from the side.

There were wicks in a drawer, and a polished silver tinderbox.

“What else?” she asked, her heart pumping quickly in her chest.

One bottle, set aside from all the others on the worktop, had no label. She had noticed it earlier. Its contents were clear, with a faint bluish tinge. Now, curious, she picked it up and unstoppered it, sniffing its contents.

Sputtering, Anna jerked her head back and replaced the stopper, her eyes watering. It was a horrible, noxious mixture; clearly a sleeping draught of some kind. Even a small sniff of it had taken her breath and made her head go woozy.

Anna shivered, then slipped it into her left-hand pocket, knowing that it might have a use.

A heavy iron file lay on one of the trays nearby. She took that too, tucking it into her belt. It would be useful to have a weapon of some kind.

Just in case…

Anna returned to the desk and picked up one of the jars, unstoppering it; yet even as she did, she heard noises from below—a single cry and a splash.

Hurrying to the south window, she looked out. Far below, at the end of the great stone buttress, the cage was now occupied. A man was struggling, spluttering in the water momentarily; then he went still, looking about him, as if coming to a sudden realization of his fate.

As he turned toward her, Anna caught her breath, horrified.

It was Aitrus.

§

Veovis glanced at A'Gaeris and smiled.

"Did you hide the Book?"

A'Gaeris pulled the Linking Book from his pocket. "You mean *this?*"

The two men were halfway along the tunnel that led from the cage. They had left Suahrnir on the platform, overlooking the cage. Now it was time to carry out the next part of their scheme.

"Are you sure she will come?" A'Gaeris asked, his eyes half-hooded.

"I am certain of it," Veovis said.

They walked on. Turning a corner, they came to the narrow steps that led up to the gallery. Here they had to go single file.

"Can I ask you something?" A'Gaeris said, as he followed Veovis up.

"Ask," Veovis said, glancing back over his shoulder as he climbed out through the hatch.

"Why do you want her? I mean, she will never love you. Not while you keep Aitrus prisoner. And if you kill him…"

"Vengeance," Veovis said, as A'Gaeris ducked out under the rim of the hatch and joined him in the strangely lit gallery.

"Why not simply kill them both?"

“Because I want them to suffer the way I suffered.” Veovis’s face was hard now, much harder than A’Gaeris had ever seen it. “I dreamed of it, when I was on the Prison Age, night after night. I want them to be tormented the way I was tormented. I want them to feel betrayed the way *I* felt betrayed.”

Behind the thick glass of the gallery windows, strange fish swam slowly, menacingly, their pale red eyes unblinking.

A’Gaeris nodded. “I understand.”

“Do you?”

“Yes, friend. It was not just my guild membership I lost. I was betrothed. Betrothed to the most beautiful young woman you have ever seen.”

“Ah…” Veovis had been about to move on, to return straight to the study, but now he changed his mind. “What do you want, A’Gaeris? I mean, what do you *really* want?”

A’Gaeris did not hesitate. “To destroy it all. That is my dream.”

“Then the Guilds…?”

“Are only the start. I want to destroy D’ni the way D’ni tried to destroy me.” A’Gaeris’s whole frame seemed to shudder with indignation. “There! Does that frighten you, Veovis?”

Veovis shook his head. “No. I know now how you feel.”

“You do?”

“Yes. Come…”

§

A’Gaeris had thought it was a storage cupboard of some kind, but inside was a long, high-ceilinged room, and lining the walls of that long room were rack after rack of guns and swords. Enough to start a small war.

Veovis turned, staring at the Philosopher thoughtfully. “You once wrote that it is fortunate that the common people are unarmed, for if they were armed, D’ni would fall overnight. Do you still believe that?”

A’Gaeris reached out, taking down one of the swords and examining it. He nodded, impressed. “I do,” he said finally, looking to Veovis with a smile.

“Then will this do?”

A’Gaeris grinned. “I see I badly misjudged you, Lord Veovis.”

§

Anna stood at the door, listening, then opened it and slipped out, into the adjacent room. There were voices coming from just down the corridor. Was there another chamber down there, one she had not noticed?

It seemed so. Recessed into the wall, partway along, was a door. It was open the slightest crack and she could hear Veovis and A’Gaeris talking within. Realizing that she might have only one chance, she hurried past and on into the gallery. To her surprise the hatch halfway down on her left was wide open. She edged over to it and listened, then peeked her head around. A flight of steps went down.

She went inside, hastening down the steps, then stopped. Ahead of her, just around a turn, she could hear Suahrnir murmuring something.

The bottle containing the sleeping draught was still in her pocket, the iron file in her right hand. Taking a cloth handkerchief from her pocket, Anna wrapped it about her mouth, then took the bottle from her pocket.

With more confidence than she felt, she stepped out around the corner. Suahrnir was sitting on a platform at the end of the tunnel, overlooking the cage. He had his back to her. Calming herself, she walked on, trying not to make any noise.

She was right beneath Suahrnir when he turned, realizing that she was there. Yet even as he turned, Anna hit him hard over the head with the file. As he collapsed, she pulled the cloth up over her nose and, unstoppering the bottle, poured its contents over his face.

A cloud of thick, white fumes rose from the platform.

Anna blinked, her eyes stinging furiously, then, closing them tight, she edged around Suahrnir and climbed up onto the cage, not daring to take a breath.

The cage swayed from side to side as she moved around the outside of it, as far as she could get from the stinging white cloud. As the cage steadied, she leaned out and raised the silk, taking in a lungful of air.

“Ti’ana? Is that you?”

Aitrus was just beneath her, blinking up at her as if only half conscious. Only his head and shoulders were above the surface of the vile, dark green liquid and she could see that there was a large, dark bruise on the side of his forehead. Seeing him thus, Anna winced, her love for him making her forget her own danger. His hands were tightly bound. They had hooked them over the massive padlock to keep him from sinking down into the water. It was cruel, but it had also probably saved his life.

"It's all right, my love," she said gently. "I'll get you out. But you must be quiet. We must not alert the others."

"I was stupid," he said, his eyes flickering closed, as if he could not keep them open. His voice was faint and fading. "Veovis said he had you prisoner. I should have known. I should have brought help."

"No," Anna said, pained by the way he blamed himself for this. She took the file from her waist and, leaning across, began to try to force the lock. "You did what you thought best."

Aitrus coughed. Some of the sleeping gas was now drifting across from the tunnel. Anna could sense its stinging presence in the air. She grimaced then leaned back on the file once more, heaving at it, trying to force the lock, but it would not budge. She needed a longer piece of metal, something with more leverage.

A sudden gust of wind, coming in off the surface of the sea, swept back the drift of noxious white gas.

"Aitrus," she said, reaching through the bars, trying to touch his brow, her fingers brushing air. "Aitrus…I shall not be long, I promise. I'll come back for you. So hold on."

But he could not hear her. His eyes were closed, and whether it was the gas or whether he had slumped back into unconsciousness she could not tell.

Time. Time was against her now.

Taking a huge gulp of air, she pulled the cloth down over her mouth again, then turned and, scrambling back around the cage, ducked back inside the tunnel, her eyes tightly shut as she stumbled through the choking whiteness.

§

Veovis was sitting at a table at the end of the armory, fitting together an incendiary device. Five completed bombs lay in a row just by his elbow; long red tubes with bulbous silver ends filled with explosive chemicals. Nearby, A'Gaeris was still working his way through the racks, looking for the ideal weapon for himself.

"We should only use guns when we need to," Veovis said, looking up at him. "For what we plan, a poisoned dart is best."

"And the incendiaries?" A'Gaeris looked down the barrel of a hunting gun at Veovis, then set the gun aside. "I would have thought they would notice one of those going off."

Veovis continued to fit the device together. "These are not for use as weapons, my friend, these are to destroy the Linking Books after we have used them."

A'Gaeris stared at him. "And the Hidden Linking Books? The ones we already have in place? Did I take those risks for nothing, Veovis?"

"No, but it might be difficult to use them, now that the guilds are more vigilant. Besides, we have a whole store of Books we can use. If time were less pressing I would be less profligate, but as things are…"

A'Gaeris nodded. "You are quite right. And it will, at least, allow us to slip in and slip out at will." His eyes gleamed. "Think of it, Veovis! They will not know what has hit them!"

Veovis smiled and nodded, then set the sixth bomb aside, next to the others. "We shall be like shadows," he said, reaching out to take another of the incomplete incendiaries from the rack by his feet. As he set it down on the desk, he glanced across at A'Gaeris again. "Bring the map from the study. We can discuss things while we work."

§

As A'Gaeris stepped into the room, he saw her. Ti'Ana, Aitrus's wife. She was at the center of the room, beside the table, hunched forward slightly, her back to him. She was very still, as if concentrating on something: reading, perhaps, or studying something.

The map of D'ni…

Smiling, A'Gaeris drew his dagger and tiptoed across until he was no more than a couple of feet from her.

“Do not move, Ti’ana,” he said, a quiet menace in his voice. “I have a knife and I will not hesitate to use it.”

She froze, her shoulders tensed.

“Turn slowly,” he said. “Very slowly. Make no sudden movements.”

She began to turn, slowly at first, very slowly; then, in a sudden rush her arms came up.

And something else. Something heavy and black that seemed to expand into his face, screeching as it did, its sharp claws digging in deeply.

§

Veovis stood, turning toward the door. The first scream had made him drop the incendiary; the second startled him into action.

He ran, out of the room and along the corridor, bursting through the first room and into the study. The screaming was louder here, mixed with the bird’s high, screeching call.

A’Gaeris was on the far side of the room, struggling to fend off the ferocious assault of the bird. Blood ran down his face and upper arms. Nearby the golden cage lay on the floor, the chain snapped, the door forced open.

Intruders…

“Help me!” A’Gaeris pleaded, putting an arm out toward Veovis. “In the Maker’s name, help me!”

Veovis stared at his ally a moment, then, drawing the old, long-barreled gun from his belt, crossed the room quickly, ignoring A’Gaeris and vanishing through the far door, heading for the far room and the corridor beyond.

§

Anna slammed the door behind her then reached up and slipped the bolt into place. Hurrying over to the bench, she took the stoppers from bottles and jars then began to pour things into various containers.

She could hear A'Gaeris's screams, even where she was, through the thickness of stone and wood, and knew that Veovis would be coming after her.

Taking her concoction, Anna poured some of the clear, thick liquid over the door, soaking the wood with it, then laid a trail of it across to the far side of the room, where the Linking Books were piled up. That done, she put the bowl aside and went back to the door, sliding the bolt back once again and pulling the door slightly ajar.

She could hear footsteps now, hurrying up the twist of steps.

Anna scrambled back across the room, setting the Linking Book she was to use to return to D'ni down on the desk to one side, open to the descriptive panel. Then, taking the length of wick, she lit it from the tinder, blowing on the smoldering end of it until it glowed.

The footsteps came to the head of the steps and stopped. There was a moment's hesitation and then the door on the far side of the room was kicked open. Veovis stepped inside, the cocked gun raised, its dark mouth pointed directly at her.

Seeing her, Veovis gave a surprised laugh. "Ti'ana! You were the last person I expected."

Anna stared back at him defiantly, her left hand hovering over the glowing panel, her right holding the smoldering wick.

Noticing the Books, he blinked, reassessing the situation. "What are you doing?"

"I am putting a stop to this. Before things get out of hand."

His face grew hard. "Give me the book, Ti'ana. Give it to me and I shall spare you. You and your son both. The rest will die. They have to. But you and Gehn can live…*if* you give me the Book."

Anna smiled and dropped the wick onto the pile of Linking Books, igniting it, at the same moment placing her other hand against the linking panel.

As the Books went up in a great rush of flame, Veovis roared and pulled the trigger. The sound of the detonation filled the room as the bullet hurtled toward her disappearing shape. At the same moment, the trail of liquid chemicals flared, the flame running along it like a rail of magma searing through the rock.

There was a great hiss and then the door behind Veovis exploded into flame, throwing him forward, his hair and cloak on fire.

But Anna did not see it. Anna had already gone.

§

The great chamber was almost dark. Only at its center, where the five great thrones were, was there a small pool of light, where a single flame flickered between the pillars. Beneath its scant illumination the five great Lords of D'ni sat, their ancient faces etched with deep concern.

"We must search the city from end to end," R'hira said, echoing what Master Jadaris had said to him not an hour before. "Every room, and every drawer of every desk. We must find these Linking Books and destroy them, else no one here is safe."

"Is it possible?" another of them asked. "Have we the time or the numbers to make such a search?"

"No," R'hira admitted, "yet we must make the attempt. Unless we do…"

He stopped dead, staring in astonishment as a figure materialized in the space before the thrones.

"What in the Maker's name…"

"Ti'ana!" R'hira cried, standing and stepping down from his throne.

Anna looked up, her face pale, then slumped down onto the floor. Blood poured from a wound in her shoulder.

"Bring help!" R'hira cried, speaking to one of the guards who stood in the shadow surrounding them. "Quick now, Guildsman! Ti'ana is badly hurt!"

Yet even as he stooped to try to help her, another figure shimmered into being right beside her.

The man's face was blackened. His hair was aflame. Smoke curled up from his burning clothes. He was doubled up, almost choking for breath, but even in that state R'hira recognized him at once.

"Veovis!"

PART SEVEN: LAST DAYS

It was over. The evidence had been heard, the verdict of the Council unanimously given. It remained now only for the Five Lords to announce the sentence.

The great chamber was hushed as Lord R'hira got to his feet and, stepping from his throne, stood over the kneeling Veovis.

Veovis was chained at hand and foot. His head had been shaved and he wore a simple prison gown of rust red, which showed his bare arms and calves. Seated just behind the kneeling prisoner, looking on attentively, were Aitrus and his wife, Ti'ana, who, because of her part in things, had been allowed to attend this final ceremony.

It was only two weeks since that moment when, to the astonishment of the five great Lords, both Ti'ana and Veovis had linked through into this self-same chamber. Both Aitrus and his wife were now much improved from their wounds. Aitrus sat there with his head bound, Ti'ana with a bandage about her wounded shoulder.

There was a silent tension in the chamber as R'hira looked about him at the seated ranks of guildsmen.

"Veovis," R'hira said quietly. "You have betrayed the trust of this Council. You have deceived us and stolen from us, destroyed our property, and…yes, *murdered* our fellow guildsmen. Such behavior is without parallel in all our long history, and it is felt that our sentence ought to reflect that. I therefore declare that you, Veovis, son of Rakeri, Lord of D'ni, shall be taken from here to the steps of the Library and there, at the seventeenth hour, before witnesses, be beheaded for your treachery."

There was a sharp intake of breath. Beheaded! It was unheard of. But Lord R'hira seemed as hard as granite as he looked about him.

"Such is the decision of the Five Lords. Will anybody speak for the accused?"

It was a traditional request at such moments, when a prisoner had been sentenced, and though this sentence was without recent parallel, it was clear that none among the Five expected anyone to speak.

Anna stood.

"Forgive me, Lord R'hira. I know I am here as a guest of the Council and as such have no right to voice my feelings; even so, I *would* like to speak in favor of the prisoner."

R’hira turned, looking to his fellows. There was a moment of eye contact among the ancients and then R’hira turned back.

“If anyone deserves the chance to speak, it is you, Ti’ana, though why you should wish to utter a word in favor of this miscreant is quite beyond my imagining. Step forward.”

At that moment Veovis screamed, “That barbaric animal is going to speak on my behalf?! Never! I won’t allow it!”

“Silence,” R’hira shouted with the pounding of his hand.

Veovis continued in his rage. “She’s a traitor, not one of us! She has breached the sanctity of the D’ni blood! Don’t you see!?”

“Guards, remove him!” R’hira shouted. “Now!”

They dragged the screaming man from the room. Calm returned to the chamber.

Anna stepped out. She bowed to each of the Five in turn, then turned about, facing the ranks of guildsmen.

“My Lords…Guildsmen. I do not wish to play down the severity of what your once-fellow Veovis has been found guilty of. Nor have I reason to feel anything but hatred for the man who tried to kill my husband and, but for a poorly aimed shot, would undoubtedly have killed me. Yet as an outsider, a newcomer to the great empire of D’ni, let me make an observation.

“This great cavern is an island of reason, of rational, considered behavior. You D’ni have developed codes of behavior, ways of dealing with situations, that are the result of thousands of years of experience. The most important of those codes, and the wisest of all, perhaps, is that which deals with those who transgress and step outside the codes. Until now, the D’ni have only rarely taken a life for a life. Until now, you have chosen the path of segregation, of cutting out the bad from your midst and isolating it, as a surgeon might isolate a virus. That, I would argue, is the path of sanity, whereas this…”

Anna paused, as if she could read the objection that was in most of their minds.

“I know what you are thinking. He escaped once. He might well escape again. And the so-called Philosopher, A’Gaeris, is still at large. Such factors must, I agree, come into your thinking. But there is one important factor that has not been considered, and that is precisely why Veovis behaved as he did.”

Anna took something from her pocket and held it up. It was a notebook of some kind.

"I have here a journal—A'Gaeris's private journal—which I took from his room in the Age from which they launched their attacks on D'ni. Had I not been ill these past few weeks, I might have read it sooner—and then could have laid this before the Council as evidence in Lord Veovis's favor, for its contents are most revelatory. As it is, I offer it to you now as a plea for clemency."

Lord R'hira, who had been listening in silence until this moment, now spoke up.

"Forgive me, Ti'ana, but what might that villain A'Gaeris possibly have to say that would excuse the prisoner's behavior?"

Anna turned, facing him. "It is all here, my Lord, every last part of it, fully documented in A'Gaeris's own hand. How he planned things; how he forged papers; how he worked through Guildsman Suahrnir to ensnare Lord Veovis into his perverse schemes; even how he manipulated my husband into going to Master Jadaris with what he 'knew.'

"Whatever he has done since, that first great wrong cannot be denied. Veovis was an innocent man. Think, then, of the bitterness he must have felt in being stripped of all title and incarcerated upon that prison rock. Oh, it is no excuse for what he subsequently did, yet I offer it as explanation."

Lord R'hira took the book from Anna and read a page or two, blinking from time to time. Then he looked up.

"We must have time to study this, Ti'ana."

"Of course," she said, giving him a grateful bow. "But as you study it, my Lord, consider the balance of good and ill that exists in all men, and try to imagine in what circumstances that balance could be tilted either way—toward great good, or toward the kind of behavior Veovis displayed toward the society that spurned him."

R'hira gave a tiny nod, his eyes smiling at Anna, then he turned, his eyes quickly gauging the response of his fellow Lords. There were nods.

"Very well," he said, turning back. "The sentence of this Council is set in abeyance until this matter can be fully considered. Until then the prisoner will be placed under constant guard."

As the meeting broke up and guildsmen began to drift out of the chamber and into the nearby rooms, R'hira came over to Anna.

"I am grateful for your intercession, Ti'ana, yet one thing bothers me. You may be right. Veovis may once have been innocent. Yet that is in the past. If we do not end his life for what he subsequently did, then we have but a single course before us, and that is to incarcerate him for the rest of his natural life. Such a course we tried before…and failed with. What if we fail a second time?"

"Then make sure you do not, Lord R'hira. Make a new and special Age for him, then, once he is safe within that place, burn the book so that no one can help him escape. Vigilance, not vengeance should be your byword."

R'hira bowed his head, impressed by her words. "Well spoken, Ti'ana."

She gave a little bow.

"Oh, and Ti'ana…do not worry. Whatever we decide, Veovis will *never* be allowed his freedom."

§

A'Gaeris sat at his desk, studying the notebook. The wooden door of the hut was closed, the blinds drawn against the sunlight. From outside came the busy sound of sawing and hammering.

He closed the book then nodded to himself. Standing, he yawned and stretched. He was wearing a simple rust-red gown that fitted tightly at the waist. A pair of D'ni glasses rested atop his freshly shaven head. Walking over to the door, he pulled them down over his eyes, then stepped outside.

Just below the hillock on which the hut stood, in a clearing between the trees, his slaves were hard at work. Already the basic frame of the room had been constructed. Now they were building the seats and shelves and, at the center of it all, the podium.

He walked down, stopping at the edge of the clearing to take out the notebook once again, turning to the page he had been looking at a moment earlier. For a moment he compared Suahrnir's sketches to the room that was being constructed in the clearing, then he slipped the book

away once more. There was no doubting it, Suahrnir had had a good eye. No detail had evaded him. Everything he needed was here. Every measurement.

He began to laugh; a deep, hearty laughter that rolled from his corpulent frame, making the natives glance up at him fearfully before returning to their work.

"But we shall change all that," he said, as his laughter subsided. "No rules. No guidelines. Nothing but what I want."

The thought of it sent a tiny shiver up his spine.

"Nothing…but what *I* want."

§

The preparations were meticulous.

Four of the guild's finest Writers were assigned the task of making the new Age; each of them allocated one specific strand of the whole. Working to Lord R'hira's brief, in copy books that had no power to link, they patiently produced their words, passing on their finished creations to the Grand Master of their Guild, Ja'ir, who, in coordination with Grand Master Jadaris of the Maintainers, compared the texts and made his subtle corrections, ensuring that the resultant Age was consistent and thus stable.

In all a hundred days passed in this fashion. But then it was finally done and, after consultation with Lord R'hira, a blank Book—a Kortee-nea—was taken from the Guild's Book Room and placed on a desk in a cell at the center of the Hall of the Maintainers. There it was guarded day and night, its pages never out of sight for a single instant as, one by one, the four Writers returned to copy their work into the Book.

By this means the privacy of the Book was maintained, for none of the four had any knowledge of what the other three had written. Only Jadaris and Ja'ir and R'hira, three of the most trustworthy men in the entire empire, knew that.

Meanwhile, in a cell just down the passageway, they placed Veovis, shackled hand and foot, two members of the City Guard with him every moment of the day and night, linked to him by chains of nara, waking and sleeping.

And so the days passed, until the Prison Book was done.

§

At the seventeenth hour on the day of judgment the great bronze bell rang out from the tower above the Hall of the Guild of Maintainers. Far below, in the lowest level of that great labyrinthine building, in the deep shadows of the Room of Punishment, the Great Lords and Grand Masters of D'ni looked on as Veovis, his head unbowed, the cords that had bound his hands and feet cut, stepped over to the podium and faced the open Book.

As the bell rang, Veovis looked about him, no flicker of fear in those pale, intelligent eyes, only, at this final moment, a sense of great dignity. Then, as the final stroke rang out, he placed his hand upon the glowing panel and linked.

As he vanished, a sighing breath seemed to pass through the watching guildsmen. Heads turned, looking to Lord R'hira.

"It is done," he said quietly. "Master Jadaris…take the Book away and burn it."

Yet even as he spoke the words there was a faint disturbance of the air before the Book, the faintest blur. For the briefest instant, R'hira thought he glimpsed a figure in a rust-red prison gown, his head shaved bare.

R'hira looked about him, surprised. Was he the only one to have seen it? And what precisely had he seen? An afterimage?

Or was this some flaw in the Book itself? After all, it was rare for a Book to be made by four separate writers, and it was possible that some minor errors had crept into the text.

He frowned, then set the matter from his mind. It was of no importance. All that mattered was that they burned the Book. Then D'ni would be safe.

Master Jadaris stepped up to the podium and, closing the Book, lifted it ceremonially in both hands, then carried it from the room.

They followed, along a passageway and through into the furnace room. Here, since time immemorial, they had burned faulty Books, destroying their failed experiments and shoddy work.

But this was different. This was a world that functioned perfectly.

And so we break our own rules, R’hira thought. And even if it were for a good cause, he still felt the breach as a kind of failure.

This is not the D’ni way. We do not destroy what is healthy.

Yet Ti’ana was right. It was either this or put Veovis to death. And there was no doubt about it now: Veovis had been an innocent man when first they found him guilty and incarcerated him.

R’hira watched as the great oven door was opened and the Book slid in. There was a transparent panel in the door. Through it he could see the gray-blue cover of the Prison Book clearly. R’hira bent slightly, looking on as the oven fired and the flames began to lick the cover of the Book.

§

The months passed swiftly. Things quickly returned to normal. For young Gehn these were strangely happy times—strange, because he had never dared hope to thrive away from his mother’s side.

In his eighth year, on the last day of his first term at the GuildCollege, his father and mother visited him. It was an Open Day, and most of the students’ parents were to be there, but for Gehn it was a very special occasion, for he had been chosen to represent the College and read out a passage from the great history of his guild that spoke of the long tradition of the Guild of Books.

The days of illness, of bullying in the night, and tearful homesickness were long behind Gehn. He had become a strong child, surprisingly tall for his age, and confident in all he did, if never outspoken. Yet he was strangely distant with his mother, as if some part of him had never forgiven her for sending him away. It was thus that he greeted her on this special day, with a respectful distance that might have been expected from any other student meeting the great Ti’ana, but not, perhaps, from her only son.

He bowed formally. “Mother. I am glad you came.”

Anna smiled and briefly held him, but she, too, sensed how things were between them. As she stepped back, Aitrus embraced Gehn.

“Well done, Gehn!” he said, grinning down at his son. “I hear nothing but good from your Guild Masters! I am very proud of you boy.

We both are!”

Gehn glanced at his mother. He could see that she was indeed proud of him, yet strangely that mattered very little beside the praise of his father. After all, his father was D’ni—of the blood—and a Council member, too. To have *his* praise was something. Yet he did not say this openly.

“I try to do my best,” he said, lowering his head with the modesty that was drilled into all students.

“Guild Master Rijahna says you have a promising future, Gehn,” Anna said, her smiled more guarded than his father’s. “Indeed, he has talked to your father of private tuition.”

This was the first Gehn had heard of this. He looked to his father wide-eyed.

“Is that true?”

Aitrus nodded. “If you want it.”

Gehn beamed. “Of course I want it! Who would not? Oh, I ache to be like them, Father! Like the Masters, I mean. To know what they know. To be as they are!”

Aitrus laughed. “I understand that feeling, Gehn, but you must be patient, too.”

Gehn lowered his head again. “Of course.” He calmed, matching his demeanor to a more somber mood. “Thank you. Thank you both. I shall make you proud of me.”

Anna smiled and reached out, ruffling his hair. “We are already proud of you, Gehn. More proud than you could ever imagine.”

§

As Gehn finished the oration, Anna felt the tightness in her stomach vanish, her anxiety replaced by a great uprush of pride. To think he had nearly died—and not once but several times! And now here he was, standing confidently before his peers and Masters—yes, and before a great hall full of parents, too—speaking with real feeling and pride of the great tradition into which he had been born.

She glanced at Aitrus and saw the great beam of a smile on her husband’s face and knew he shared all she felt.

My son.

Oh, it was difficult sometimes. Gehn could be cold and distant, but she put that down to his age, yes, and to other things. It had not been easy for him being of mixed blood. Yet he had come through it all triumphantly.

As Guild Master Rijahna stepped up to the podium, he gave a little bow to Gehn. There was the faintest trace of a smile on his lips, a trace that vanished as he turned to face the audience.

"And now, guildsmen, ladies, if you would like to come through to the refectory…"

But Master Rijahna had barely formed the word when the whole building shook. He looked up, surprised, as if he had imagined it, but from the murmur in the audience, from the way a number of the guildsmen and their ladies had risen to their feet, he was not alone in experiencing that tremor.

It came again, stronger this time, and with it a low rumbling noise. Dust fell from overhead.

Outside, the great bell of D'ni was sounding.

And there were only two reasons for that bell to sound: the death of one of the Five, or a threat to D'ni itself.

Rijahna swallowed back his momentary fear and leaned upon the podium.

"Ladies, guildsmen. Please remain calm."

He turned, looking to his fellow Masters and to the young pupils, who stared back at him, silent yet clearly afraid.

"It will be all right," he said quietly, his voice offering them a reassurance he did not feel. "Be calm and follow me outside and all will be well, I promise you. All will be well…"

§

Anna saw it at once as she emerged from the Guild Hall, there on the far side of the great cavern. A great crack had opened in the wall of the cave, and from it spewed a dark cloud of gas.

She looked to Aitrus, as if he might explain it, but from the expression on his face he seemed as dumbfounded as anyone.

“What is it?” she asked, trying not to succumb to the panic that seemed to be spreading among the people all about her. At the sight of the dark cloud some of the women had started screaming and wailing.

“I do not know,” he said, unable to tear his eyes from it, “but it might be best to link away from here, until more is known.”

“But you will be needed, Aitrus…”

He looked to her. “I did not mean myself. You and Gehn. You should take him home, to the mansion, then go to Gemedet. At once. There are provisions there.”

“And you?” she asked, fearing for him suddenly.

He smiled, then kissed her. “I shall come when I can, Ti’ana. But take Gehn straightaway. And look after him.”

“All right. But take care, my love. And come when you can.”

“I shall,” he said, then, turning, he hastened away, heading for the Guild House.

Anna hesitated a moment, watching Aitrus go, an awful feeling filling her at the sight of him making his way through the crowd; then, determined to do as he had asked, she turned, beginning to make her way back up the steps, anxious to find Gehn.

§

Slowly the dark cloud spread, like a mighty veil being drawn across the far side of the cavern. Inch by inch it crept across the lake, edging toward D’ni, and where it touched the surface of the lake, the light from the lake was extinguished.

The light-giving algae were dying, by the look of it; poisoned by the noxious fumes of the cloud.

And it that cloud were to reach out its fingers to D’ni city?

Then they would also die.

The city below was in turmoil. The shrieks of terror and wailing of the desperate were dreadful to hear. There were great queues now at all of the Common Libraries, as people made their way to the safety of the common Ages.

Anna stared across the cavern for a moment longer, horrified, then hurried on, taking Gehn’s hand and pulling him along behind her. There

was not far to go now and she was beginning to think about what she would need to pack—journals and books and the like—when the third tremor struck.

It was by far the largest of the three tremors and threw them both from their feet, showering them with dust and debris.

Walls were crumbling now. Buildings were crashing to the ground. Just up ahead of them, the front of one of their neighbors' mansions tumbled into the alleyway, throwing up a great cloud of dust.

As the tremor faded, Anna lifted herself onto her hands and knees and turned anxiously. But Gehn was fine: He had a small cut on his brow, but it was almost nothing.

"Come on," she said, getting to her feet then taking his hand again, "before the next one hits."

But they had barely gone a dozen paces when the whole cavern seemed to resound like a struck gong.

They clung to each other, waiting for the great ceiling to come down on them or the earth to open up beneath them, but despite the mighty roar of falling masonry and cracking walls, they came through untouched.

Indoors, Tasera was waiting for them anxiously.

"Thank the Maker you are here," she said, relieved to see at least two of her family home safe. "But where is Aitrus?"

"He has gone to the Guild House," Anna said, more calmly than she felt. "He will come when he can."

Tasera gave a nod of resignation. "Kahlis went, too, as soon as the first tremor struck. No doubt they will return together."

Anna nodded, then said, "I need to get one or two things from the study. Take Gehn and link through. I will follow you just as soon as I can. Aitrus said we were to link to Gemedet."

"Gemedet? But surely Ko'ah would be safer?"

"It was what he said."

Tasera bowed her head, for once giving in to her daughter-in-law. "Then go quickly, Ti'ana. I shall see you in Gemedet."

§

Anna slipped the knapsack onto her back, then went out into the corridor. Time was pressing now, but she could not go until she had taken one final look at things. Climbing the stairs, she emerged onto the balcony then hurried over to the rail.

The great city was stretched out below where she stood, layer after layer of ancient stone streets and houses, reaching down to the great circle of the harbor and Kerath's massive arch. Though it was day, lights burned in most of the houses, for a strange twilight was falling over D'ni as the great cloud spread, its poisonous fumes dousing the lake's soft glow.

The dark cloud now filled almost half of the cavern, its color now discernible as a filthy brown. The edges of it drifted slowly, in a dreamlike fashion, more like a sluggish liquid than a gas. Even as she watched, wispy brown tendrils of the gas extended about Kerath's Arch and slowly curled across the surface of the harbor.

And where the gas touched, the algae faded, the bright glow dying like sputtering embers.

The sight of it chilled her.

Where are you, Aitrus? she wondered, looking across to the left, where the Guild House stood, its massive, tiered roof dominating the surrounding Halls. *Are you safe, my love?*

As if voicing the fear she felt at that moment, a great noise of wailing drifted up from the lower city. Many were safe now, but there were still some—hundreds, maybe more—who had not made it to the Common Libraries and the safety of the Ages. It was they who now faced the coming of the great cloud as it slowly filled the harbor with its roiling darkness, then spilled into the narrow lanes and alleyways that led up from the waterfront.

The Maker help them…

Yet even as she thought it, she caught a glimpse of a guildsmen hurriedly ascending the main street that led between the gates, his cloak streaming behind him as he ran. He was carrying something odd, some kind of cylinder, yet she knew at once who it was.

"Aitrus!" she yelled, waving frantically at him.

He slowed, his head turning, and then he waved back at her, hurrying on again, disappearing briefly behind a row of houses, while far below him, like the breath of fate itself, the dark gas slowly climbed the levels, destroying any living thing it touched.

§

It was raining on Gemedet, a fresh, pure rain that, after the nightmare of the cavern, seemed to wash all stain of it from them as they walked down the slope toward the encampment.

Seeing them step out from among the trees, Gehn stood then ran toward them, hugging his father fiercely. The boy's hair was slicked back, his clothes soaked, but he seemed not to mind.

Picking him up, Aitrus carried Gehn down the rest of the slope and into the shelter of the cabin. Tasera looked up as they entered, a great beam of a smile lighting her face at the sight of Aitrus. Then, seeing only Anna enter behind him, she frowned.

"Where is your father, Aitrus?"

"In D'ni," Aitrus answered somberly, slipping the cylinder from his back and balancing it in the corner.

"He stayed?"

"He agreed to. Along with the Five and all the other Grand Masters. It was their plan to go to one of the Guild worlds and there to debate things further."

"Then he is safe," she said, relieved.

"For a time," Aitrus answered, taking the mask from his cloak pocket and placing it on top of the cylinder, the end of it dangling from the great silver nozzle.

"What do you mean?"

Aitrus shrugged. "I mean only that none of us knows yet what has really happened or where the gas is coming from. As for the tremors, there were no early signs in the rock, nor is there any history of such local disturbances."

"So what are we to do? Stay here?"

"For a time, yes. Until things blow over. I have been ordered to remain here for ten days. At the end of that I am to return to D'ni, wearing the mask and cylinder. Others will return at the same time. If all is well, we shall bring the people back to D'ni."

"And if it is not?" Tasera asked, her face gaunt.

Aitrus sighed. “Then we stay here…for a time. Until we can *make* things well again in D’ni.”

§

The air was a horrible, sickly yellow-brown, choking the ancient streets and alleyways, as though a wintry fog had descended upon the great tiered city in the cave. Silent it was, and dark, though not as dark now as at first.

Here and there, at crossroads and at gates, lamps had been set on the top of poles. Huge fire-marbles the size of fists glowed red, or blue, or green behind the thick glass panes of the lamps; yet their lights burned dimly, as though through depths of dark and murky water.

Silent it was, yet in that silence the creaking of a cart could now be heard, along with the shuffle of two men, making their slow way through that subterranean place.

As they came into a pool of dark red light, one could see the airtight masks that encased their heads, linked by strong hoses to the air tanks on their backs. They wore long leather boots and thick gloves that reached to their elbows.

Their cart was loaded high, pale hands and feet jutting lifelessly from the midst of that macabre bundle of rags and bones. Leaning forward, they pushed in silence, sharing the weight without complaint. Ahead, just beyond the lamp, was their destination.

Coming to the foot of the steps, they set the handles of the cart down, then began to unload, taking each body by its wrists and ankles and carrying it up into the semi-darkness of the entrance hall.

Here, too, they had placed lamps, lighting the way into the great Book Room.

It was not their first journey, nor would it be their last. For a full week now they had gone about their task, patiently, unendingly, collecting in the harvest of their sowing.

So many bodies, there were. So much illness and death. It was hard to credit that the gas had undone so many. And then the quakes.

While one held the body propped against the podium, the other took its hand and placed it over the glowing panel of the Book, moving his

own hand back as the link was made.

The body shimmered for an instant and was gone.

And so on, endlessly, it seemed. A thousand corpses, maybe more: their dead hands, filled yet with living cells, linking into the Ages; their bodies wracked with illness; rife with the contagion that had swept these mortuary streets.

Looking through their masks at one another, the two men smiled grimly.

“Another, Philosopher?”

“Oh, another, my Lord. Most certainly another.”

The two men laughed; a dark and bitter laughter. And then they returned, to bring another body from the cart. To send another of their dark seeds through into the Ages. Destroying the sanctuaries one at a time: finishing the work they had begun.

§

It was the evening of the ninth day. Tomorrow Aitrus would return to D’ni. As the day ended, they sat on a platform of rock just above the falls, just Anna and Aitrus, looking out over the little world they had made.

The sun, behind them, cast their shadows long across the lush greens of the valley. For a long time they were silent, then Anna spoke.

“What do you think you will find?”

Aitrus plucked a stem of grass and put it to his mouth. Now that it was evening, he had pushed his glasses up onto his brow, but where they had sat about his eyes, his pale flesh was marked with thin red furrows. He shrugged. “Who knows? Yet I fear the worst. I had hoped some message would have come through earlier than this. Or my father…”

Anna reached out, laying her hand softly against his neck. He feared for his father, more than for himself. So it was with Aitrus. It was always others before himself. And that was why, ultimately, she loved him: for that selflessness in him.

“How long will you be?”

Aitrus turned slightly, looking at her. “As long as I am needed.”

“And if you do not return?”

“Then you will stay here.”

She began to shake her head, but he was insistent. “No, Ti’ana. You *must* do this for me. For me, and for Gehn.”

The mention of Gehn stilled her objections. Aitrus was right. Gehn was still only eight. Losing one parent would be bad enough, but to lose both could prove devastating, even though Tasera would still be here.

She gave the barest nod.

“Good,” Aitrus said, “then let us go back to the encampment. I have much to prepare before I leave.”

§

It was early when Aitrus set off. All farewells had been said; now, as Anna looked on, Gehn cuddled against her, Aitrus pulled on the cylinder, checked it was working properly, then slipped the airtight mask down over his head.

Seeing him thus, Anna felt her stomach tighten with anxiety.

Aitrus turned, waved to them, then turned back, placing his hand against the open Linking Book.

The air about his figure swirled as if it had been transformed into some other substance, then cleared. Aitrus was gone.

Anna shivered. Words could not say the fear she felt at that moment: a dark, instinctive fear for him.

“Be brave, my darling,” she said, looking down at Gehn. “Your father will come back. I promise he will.”

§

Aitrus could hear his own breathing loud within the mask as he linked into the study. He took out the lamp he had brought and, striking the fire-marble, lit it and held it up, looking about him.

Nothing had been disturbed, yet all had been transformed. The gas had gone, but where it had been it had left its residue, coating everything with a thin layer of yellow-brown paste.

The sight of it sickened him to his stomach. Was it all like this, everywhere in D’ni? Had nothing survived untouched?

Outside in the corridor it was all the same, as though some host of demons had repainted everything the same hellish shade. Where his booted feet trod he left long smearing marks upon the floor.

Aitrus swallowed. The air he breathed was clean and pure, yet it seemed tainted somehow by what he saw.

He went down the stairs, into the lower level of the house. Here some of the gas remained, pooled in the corners of rooms. Faint wisps of it drifted slowly through open doorways.

Aitrus watched it a moment. It seemed alive, almost; hideously, maliciously alive.

No sooner had he had the thought, than a second followed. This was no simple chemical mix. He should have known that by the way it had reacted with the algae in the lake. This was biological. It *was* alive.

He went out again, heading for the front door, then stopped, deciding to douse the lantern, just in case. He did so, letting the darkness embrace him, then he stepped up to the door, finding his way blindly.

Outside it was somewhat lighter, but only comparatively so. Most of the cavern was dark—darker than Aitrus had ever imagined possible—but there *were* lights, down below him and to his left, not far off if he estimated correctly; approximately where the great Halls of the guilds had once stood.

Had stood. For even in the darkness he could see evidence of the great ruin that had fallen upon D’ni. Between him and the lights, silhouetted against them, was a landscape of fallen houses and toppled walls, as if a giant had trampled his way carelessly across the rooftops.

Aitrus sighed, then began to make his way toward those lights. There would be guildsmen there, he was certain of it. Maybe even his father, Kahlis. They would have news, yes, and schemes to set things right again.

The thought of that cheered him. He *was* D’ni, after all!

Aitrus stopped and, taking out the lantern, lit it again. Then, holding it up before him, he began to make his way through the ruin of the streets and lanes, heading for the Guild House.

§

The Guild House was empty. Its great doors, which had once been proudly guarded, were now wide open. It had been built well and had withstood the ravages of the great quakes that had struck the city, yet all about it was a scene of devastation that had taken Aitrus's breath. There was barely a building that had not been damaged.

And everywhere the sickly yellow-brown residue of the gas.

Aitrus stood in the great Council chamber, facing the five thrones, his lantern held up before him. It was here that he had left his father. Here that he had made his promise to return on the tenth day. So where were they all? Had they been and gone? Or had they never come?

There was one sure and certain way to find out.

He walked through, into one of the tiny rooms that lay behind the great chamber. There, open on the desk, was a Linking Book. As all else, it was covered with the pastelike residue, yet the glow of the linking panel could be glimpsed. Though a thin layer of the paste covered the glowing rectangle, a hand print could be clearly seen upon it.

Some had linked *after* the gas had settled.

Aitrus went across and, using the sleeve of his cloak, wiped the right-hand page clean. At once the glow came clear. If the Five Lords and his father were anywhere, they were there, in that Age.

He doused the lantern and stowed it, then placed his hand upon the panel. He linked.

At once Aitrus found himself in a low cave. Sunlight filtered in from an entrance just above him. He could hear birdsong and the lulling noise of the sea washing against the shoreline.

He sighed, relieved. All was well.

Releasing the clamp at the side of his mask, he eased it up, taking a deep gulp of the refreshing air, then, reaching behind him, switched off the air supply. He would need it when he returned to D'ni.

Quickly he climbed the twist of steps that had been cut into the side of the cave wall, pausing only to take out his glasses and slip them on. Then, his spirits raised, he stepped out, into the sunlight.

The buildings were just below him, at the end of a long grassy slope. They blazed white in the sunlight, their perfect domes and arches

blending with the green of the surrounding wood, the deep blue of the shimmering sea that surrounded the island.

They would be inside the Great Library, of course, debating what to do. That was why they were delayed, why they had not come. Even so, Aitrus was surprised that they had not set a guard by the Linking Book.

He stopped dead, blinking, taking that in.

There *would* have been a guard. There always *was* a guard. In fact, he had never come here, before now, without there being a guard in the cave.

Something was wrong.

Aitrus drew his dagger then walked on, listening for any sound. Coming around the side of the library, he slowed. The silence was strange, unnatural. The great wooden door was open. Inside the room was shadowy dark.

The elders of D'ni sat in their seats about the chamber, thirty, maybe forty in all. In the darkness they seemed to be resting, yet their stillness was not the stillness of sleep.

Slipping his dagger back into its sheath, Aitrus took out his lamp and lit it, then stepped into the chamber.

In the glow of the lantern he could see the dreadful truth of things. They were dead, every last one of them, dead, their faces pulled back, he chins slightly raised, as if in some final exhalation.

Aitrus shuddered, then turned.

"Father…"

Kahlis sat in a chair close by the door, his back to the sunlight spilling in from outside. His hands rested on the arms of the chair, almost casually it seemed, yet the fingers gripped the wood tightly and the face had that same stiffness in it that all the other faces had, as if they had been caught suddenly and unawares by some invisible enemy.

Aitrus groaned and sank down to his knees, his head lowered before his father. For a long while he remained so. Then, slowly, he raised his head again.

"What in the Maker's name has happened here?"

Aitrus turned, looking up into the masked face of the newcomer. The man was standing in the doorway, the sunlight behind him. He was wearing the purple cloak of the Guild of Ink-Makers, but Aitrus could not make out his features clearly in the gloom.

“It’s some kind of virus,” he began, then, seeing that the other made to unmask himself, shook his head. “No! Keep that on!”

The guildsman let his hand fall away from the strap, then looked about him. “Are they all dead?” he asked, a note of hopelessness entering his voice.

“Yes,” Aitrus answered bleakly. “Or so it seems.”

§

The grave was new, the earth freshly turned. Nearby, as if surprised, a guard lay on his back, dead, his hands gripping each other as if they fought, his jaw tightly clenched.

Aitrus stared at the guard a moment, then, looking to his fellow guildsman, Jiladis, he picked up the spade once more and began to dig, shoveling the last of the dark earth back into the hole. They really were all dead—guildsmen and guards, servants and natives. Not one had survived the plague, if plague it was.

And himself? Was *he* now infected with it?

The last book of commentary told the tale. They had found it open on a desk in one of the other buildings, its scribe, an ancient of two hundred years or more, slumped over it. The body had come through a week ago, only two days after the evacuation of D’ni. They had burned it, naturally, but the damage had been done.

“What will you do?” Jiladis asked, his voice muted through the mask he still wore.

“I suppose I will go back,” Aitrus answered. “To D’ni, anyway.”

And there was the problem. If he *was* infected, he could not go back to Gemedet, for he could not risk infecting Gehn and Anna and his mother. Yet was it fair not to let them know what had happened here?

Besides which, he needed to get back, now that he knew what was happening, for he had to return to the mansion and get the Linking Book. Gemedet at least would then be safe.

If he was not already too late.

“I shall come with you,” Jiladis said finally. “There’s nothing here.”

Aitrus nodded, then looked up at the open sky and at the sun winking fiercely down at him.

The surface. He could always make his way to the surface.

Yes. But what about any others who had survived? Could he persuade Jiladis, for instance, that his future lay on the surface?

Aitrus set the spade aside, then knelt, murmuring the D'ni words of parting over the grave. Then, standing again, he made his own, more informal farewell.

"Goodbye, my father. May you find peace in the next Age, and may Yavo, the Maker, receive your soul."

Aitrus lingered awhile, his eyes closed as he remembered the best of his father. Then he turned and slowly walked away, making his way back to the linking cave, Jiladis following slowly after.

§

The door to the family Book Room had been smashed open, the shelves of the room ransacked. On the podium the Book of Ko'ah lay open, its pages smeared, a clear handprint over the panel.

Aitrus stared at it in shock.

Signs of desecration were everywhere—smeared footprints in the hallways and in almost every room—but had they gone upstairs.

His heart almost in his mouth, Aitrus slipped and skidded up the stairs in his haste.

His workroom was at the far end of the corridor. Footsteps led along the corridor toward it. Aitrus stopped dead, staring at them in horror.

So they had been here, too.

In the doorway he paused, looking about him. A circle of footprints went halfway into the room then came away.

He frowned, not understanding, then rushed across the room. The Book of Gemedet was where he had left it on the desk. The open pages were undisturbed, the thin layer of pasty residue untouched.

Aitrus sighed with relief. Taking a clean cloth from a drawer, he cleaned the cover carefully, then tucked it into the knapsack beside the other things he had packed for the journey.

He had taken extra cylinders from the Hall of the Guild of Miners and food from the sealed vaults in the Hall of the Caterers—enough for an eight-day journey.

If he had eight days.

And Anna? Would she keep her word? Would she stay in Gemedet and not try to come after him? He hoped so. For if she linked here, there would be no linking back for her. Not to Gemedet, anyway, for the book would be with him, and he was going to the surface.

Aitrus went to the front door and looked out across the darkness of the cavern.

He had seen them, yesterday, on his return, or thought he did: the ghostly figures of A'Gaeris and Veovis, pushing their cart of death. And, seeing them, he had known that nowhere was safe from them: not in D'ni, anyway, nor in any of the linked Ages.

If he and Anna and the boy were to have any kind of life, it would have to be up there, on the surface. But were the tunnels still open? Or had the great quakes that had flattened so much in D'ni destroyed them also?

He would have to go and see for himself. If he lived that long. If sickness did not take him on the journey.

§

It was the evening of the sixteenth day, and Anna sat at Gehn's bedside, listening to his gentle snores in the shadows of the room. A book of D'ni tales lay beside her, facedown where she had put it. Worn out by a day of playing in the woods, Gehn had fallen asleep even as she read to him. Not that she minded. Anything that took his mind off his father's prolonged absence was welcome, and it was good to see him sleep so deeply and peacefully.

Leaning across, she kissed his brow, then stood and went outside. The stars were out now, bright against the sable backdrop of the sky. Anna yawned and stretched. She had barely slept this past week. Each day she expected him back, and each day, when he did not come, she feared the very worst.

Tasera, she knew, felt it almost as keenly as she did; maybe more so, for she, after all, had both a husband and a son who were missing; yet

Tasera found it much easier to cope with than she did, for she was D'ni and had that rocklike D'ni stoicism. Had it been a thousand days, Tasera would have waited still, patient to the last.

Am I so impatient, then? Anna asked herself, walking over to the rock at the head of the valley.

She smiled, knowing what Aitrus would have said. It was the difference in their life expectancy, or so he argued. She was a short fuse and burned fast, while he…

Come back, she pleaded silently, looking out into the star-filled night. *Wherever you are—whenever you are—come back to me, Aitrus*.

If they had to spend the rest of their years on Gemedet, she would be content, if only she could be with him.

And if that is not your fate?

It was her father's voice. It was a long time since she had heard that voice—a long, long time since she had needed the comfort of it.

He has been a good man to you, Anna.

"Yes," she said quietly, speaking to the air. "I could not have wished for a better partner."

But now you must learn to be alone.

She blinked. There was such certainty in that voice. "No," she said, after a moment. "He will come back. He promised, and he always keeps his promises."

The voice was silent.

"Ti'ana?"

Anna started, then turned. Tasera was standing not ten paces from her, just below her on the slope. She must have been walking down by the stream. Coming closer, Tasera looked at her and frowned.

"Who were you talking to?"

Anna looked aside, then answered her honestly. "I was speaking to my father."

"Ah…" Tasera stepped closer, so that Anna could see her eyes clearly in the half-light. "And what did he say?"

"He said I must learn to be alone."

Tasera watched her a moment, then nodded. "I fear it might be so."

"But I thought…"

"Kahlis is not there. I cannot feel him anymore. No matter where he was, no matter *when*, he was always there, with me. So it is when you

have lived with a man a century and more. But suddenly there is a gap—an absence, if you like. He is not there anymore. Something has happened to him."

Tasera fell silent.

"I did not know. I thought…" Anna frowned. What *had* she thought? That only *she* felt like that? That only she and he were related to each other in that strange, nonphysical manner? No. For how could that possibly be? Even so, sometimes it felt as if they were the books of each other—to which each one linked. And when one of those books was destroyed, what then? Would there no longer be a connection? Would there only be a gap, an awful, yawning abyss?

The thought of it terrified her. To be *that* alone.

"I am sorry, Tasera," Anna said finally. "I do hope you are wrong."

"And I," Tasera said, reaching out to take her hands. "And I."

§

Aitrus woke. The darkness in his head was matched by the darkness in which he lay. It was damp and cold and his whole body ached, yet the air was fresher than he remembered it.

He put his hand up to his face, surprised. The mask…

And then he remembered. The air had given out. He had had to take off the mask or suffocate. And that was when he had linked—linked back to Gemedet.

Aitrus lay there a while, letting his eyes grow accustomed to the darkness of the cave. It had to be night outside, for not a trace of sunlight filtered down from above. He listened, straining to hear some sound, but it was hard to know whether he was imagining it or not. For eight days now he had known nothing but silence. The awful, echoing silence of the rock.

All of his life, he realized now, there had been noises all about him—the faint murmur of the great fans that brought the air into the caverns, or the dull concussion from a mining rig, busy excavating in the deep; the noises of the city itself, or of boats out on the lake; the bells that sounded out each hour of every day, and the normal noises of the household all about him. Such sounds had formed the continuum of his existence, ceaseless and unnoticed. Until now.

Now death had come to D’ni. Yes, and to every part of its once great empire. Even in the tunnels he had found the dead—Miners at their work, or Maintainers, whose job it was to patrol the great perimeter.

Yes, and he had even found the source of death: the great machine that had proved D’ni’s bane. In one of the lower caverns he had come upon it, its huge canisters empty now. They had used such machines in the Guild of Surveyors, to provide air for tricky excavations, or before a regular supply could be pumped up from D’ni itself. But Veovis had used it to pump poisons back into D’ni, letting D’ni’s own circulatory system distribute it to every tiny niche.

Even had they switched the great fans down, which eventually they did, it would have proved a bleak choice: to suffocate from lack of air, or die of the poisonous bacteria that that same air carried.

It was not until he saw the machine that he knew for sure; not until then that he knew Anna had been wrong to intercede.

It was not her fault, he kept telling himself; *she was not to know*. Yet it was hard to see it otherwise. All of this death, all of this vast suffering and misery, was down to a single man, Veovis. For all that A’Gaeris had been a willing partner, it was Veovis’s bitterness, his anger and desire for revenge, that had been behind this final, futile act. And if he had been dead?

Then my father would yet be alive. And Lord R’hira. And Master Jadaris. And Jerahl…

Aitrus sat up, shaking his head, but the darkness kept coming back. Ti’ana is to blame. My darling wife, Ti’ana.

“No!”

Outside a bird flapped away between the trees.

It was the first natural sound he had heard in days.

Aitrus sniffed the air. It smelled sweet. He could still smell the rubber of the mask upon his face, but this air was different. It lacked the strange metallic taste of the air he had grown accustomed to.

Slowly, almost stumblingly, he climbed up, until he stood at the mouth of the cave, looking down through the trees toward the encampment. It seemed empty, deserted, but then it was late.

Hi sighed. I ought to wash, he thought. More than that, I ought to burn these clothes, or bury them. Just in case…

In truth, he ought not to have come. Indeed, he would not have come but for the fact that lack of air had addled his brain. But now that he was back he would make the best of things.

At least the Linking Book was relatively safe; though who knew how thorough Veovis would be? If he chose to search the tunnels, then he might come upon it, lying there, and then even Gemedet would not be safe.

The thought of it petrified him.

He had the urge to cough. Stifling it, he turned, looking up beyond the cave. If he remembered correctly, there was a path that led up and to the left, curving across to the head of the falls. He would find a place up there and bury the suit, then wash himself.

And then he would come back here, naked, the bearer of ill news, to face his mother and his wife.

§

They had found Aitrus up by the pool, beside the waterfall, his body bathed in sweat, his eyes staring. Getting two servants to carry him, they had brought him back to the encampment and laid him on the bed. Then, for the next three days, Tasera and Anna took turns tending him, bathing his brow, and holding his hand while the fever raged on.

On the morning of the fourth day he finally woke. Anna had been sleeping in the tent nearby when Gehn came and shook her.

"Mother! Mother! Father is awake!"

She hurried across to the cabin to find Aitrus awake, his eyes clear and lucid. Tasera sat beside him, smiling and holding his hand. He looked weak, but he was alive, and seeing Anna, a faint smile came to his lips.

"Ti'ana…"

His voice was little more than a breath.

"Do not talk," she said, going over to kneel beside the bed and take his hand.

"I must," he said, the words the faintest whisper.

"No," she said. "You must rest. You must get back your strength."

But Aitrus shook his head. "I am dying, Ti'ana. I know it. But I have been given this moment and I must use it."

He paused, coughing a little, then continued, his voice wavering a little.

"They are dead. Everyone…dead. My father…I buried him. And D'ni…D'ni is ended. But there is a way out. Through the tunnels. I mapped it. My notebook…"

"Yes, yes," Anna said, impatiently. "But you must rest now, Aitrus, *please."*

For a moment his eyes blinked closed. With an effort he opened them again, his eyes looking to Anna pleadingly. "You must go, Ti'ana. Please. Promise me you will go. You are not safe here…"

"Why? Why aren't we safe here?"

But Aitrus had drifted into sleep again. His head had fallen back and his breathing was shallow.

"Let him sleep," Tasera said, looking to Anna, as if concern for her boy was the only thing in the universe; yet Anna could see that Aitrus's news had shocked her. Indeed, it had shocked them both. Then, suddenly, she remembered Gehn.

She whirled about. Gehn was standing in the doorway, staring, his face aghast.

"It isn't true," he said, his voice tiny. "Tell me it isn't true!"

But she could not lie, and as he saw it in her face, so that look returned: a look of purest horror. Turning, he fled.

"Gehn!" she cried, going to the doorway. "Gehn! Come back!"

But Gehn was already at the edge of the wood. With the barest glance back, he disappeared among the trees.

Anna turned back, looking to Tasera, but Tasera was not there. Her eyes seemed distant and hollow now and her shoulders sagged, as if her son's soft words—so quiet, so insubstantial—had broken her. Even as Anna looked, a tear trickled down Tasera's cheek and fell.

Gone. All of it gone. But how was that possible? Surely some had survived?

She stared at Aitrus, wondering what else he had not told her. Why was this Age not safe? Why?

"Tell me, Aitrus," she said quietly. "*Please* tell me."

But Aitrus did not answer her.

§

That afternoon Tasera took to her bed, complaining of a migraine. Anna, thinking it had to do with Kahlis's death, decided it was best to leave her be to grieve. Having made certain Tasera was comfortable, she went to see if she could find where Gehn had got to. There was no sign of him. But when she returned two hours later it was to find that Tasera had worsened considerably.

Not only that, but the two servants who had helped carry Aitrus down from the pool were now displaying the exact same symptoms he had shown. They had been suffering from minor stomach pains for days, but now both of them had gone down with a full-blown fever.

As the afternoon became evening, Anna began o grow worried. Aitrus still showed no sign of waking, yet it was for Tasera she was most concerned, for she had slipped into a fretful, fevered sleep. Then, just after sundown, Anna went to check on the two servants, whom she had placed nearby in the storage tent, and found that one of them had died.

She was standing there, outside the tent, when Gehn wandered back into the camp.

"Gehn?"

Gehn did not even glance at her, but walked on past her, going inside the cabin.

Anna walked across. Gehn was sitting in a corner, in the darkness, staring at his father's reclining form. She watched him a moment, her heart going out to him. Then, taking the lantern from the side, she struck the fire-marble, closed the plate, and hung it on the hook overhead.

In its sudden glow she could see that Gehn had been crying.

"Gehn? Are you all right?"

He turned his head and looked at her, coldly, sullenly, then looked away.

"Two of the servants are ill," she said quietly.

Gehn made no gesture, no response. He simply stared at his father.

"Gehn…we must think of leaving here."

But Gehn was like a statue, his child's face hard and cold as it stared at his dying father.

§

That night the rest of the servants ran away. While Gehn slept, Anna sat beside Tasera, bathing her face and holding her hand. Yet in the early hours of morning, Aitrus's mother convulsed and died.

Anna sat there for a long time afterward, staring into space. Gehn was asleep in the corner. Aitrus lay nearby, his shallow breathing barely audible. In this one room was her whole world—all that mattered to her, anyway—and it was slowly falling apart about her.

Just as before, she thought, real despair touching her for he first time.

She stood up abruptly then crossed the room, picking up the bag Aitrus had brought back with him from D'ni. She had been busy until now even to remember it, but now she sat down and rummaged through it.

Here was his journal, that he kept with him at all times.

Lighting a lamp, she opened the notebook and began to leaf through it, stopping finally at a series of maps and diagrams Aitrus had made. The first were of the tunnels leading to the cavern where the machines were and, beyond it, several miles distant, the Lodge. Aitrus had added to this map, drawing thick dark lines across a number of the tunnels. It was clear that they were blocked. Indeed, looking at the map, she saw that there was no access to the surface by this route. On the next page was another map, but this one ended in dead-ends and white, unfilled space.

Anna looked up, understanding. Aitrus had spent the last week or so tramping through the tunnels, trying to find a route for their escape, spending his precious energies so that they might find a safe way to the surface.

Aitrus was dying, she knew that now for certain. Yet even at the end he had been true. Even at the end he had thought of others before himself. Of her, and Gehn.

She looked back at the journal. The next map was different—much more complex than the others. It extended over several pages.

Anna smiled, appreciating what he had done here. Elevations, rock-types, physical details—all were noted down. It was a real labyrinth, but Aitrus had done his best to make each twist and turn as clear as he

could. She traced the zigzag line of it with her finger over several pages, then looked up, laughing softly.

The volcano! It came out at the old dormant volcano where her father and she had used to stop on their way to Tadjinar.

She smiled and spoke softly to the air. “You did well, my love.”

“Did I?”

His voice, so unexpected, startled her. She turned to find him sitting up, watching her.

“Aitrus?”

“We have to go.”

Anna blinked. You are dying, she thought. You are not going anywhere. But he was insistent.

“You must pack, Ti’ana. Now, while there is still time.”

“Time for what?”

“I am coming with you,” he said, then coughed. “Back to D’ni. I will help you find the way.”

“But you are ill, Aitrus.”

In answer he threw back the sheet and, steadying himself against the wall with one hand, slowly stood. His eyes looked to her imploringly. “I must do this, Ti’ana. Do you understand that?”

She stared at him, her fear and love for him mixed violently at that moment, and then she nodded. “I understand.”

§

Packing the last few things into the bag, Anna slipped it onto her back and went outside, into the sunlight. Gehn was just below her, standing beside his father, supporting him, as they looked down at Tasera’s grave.

Anna sighed, then walked across. Gehn was wearing the suit she had made for him and the mask lay loose about his neck. His own knapsack was on his back.

“Are you ready?”

Both Gehn and Aitrus looked to her and nodded. Then, on impulse, Gehn ran down the slope and, bending, leaned out over the edge.

Anna looked to Aitrus and frowned, wondering what he was doing, but in a moment Gehn was back, holding out a tiny sheath of white flowers

for her to take. Two other bunches were in his other hand.

She took them from him, then, knowing what he intended, cast the flowers onto Tasera's grave and stepped back, allowing Gehn and Aitrus to do the same.

"Farewell, dear Mother," Aitrus said, looking out past the mound at the beauty of the valley. "You will be with me always."

Gehn stood there a moment, then, bowing his head, scattered the flowers and said his own farewell: "Goodbye, Grandmother. May we meet again in the next Age."

Anna blinked, surprised. He seemed to have grown up so much these past few weeks. She put out her hand to him.

"Come, Gehn. We must go now."

Gehn hesitated a moment, then, with a glance at his father, reached out and took her hand. Anna gave it a little squeeze, then, turning from the grave, began to climb the slope, heading for the linking cave, Aitrus following behind.

§

It was the twenty-second day after the fall.

Anna stood beside Aitrus on the balcony of the mansion, Gehn in front of her, her arms about his shoulders as they looked out over the ruins of D'ni. To her surprise the air had proved clean, and after several tests in the workroom, they had decided to remove their masks. There was no trace now of the gas that had wreaked such havoc, though its residue remained, like a dried crust over everything. Moreover, someone had reactivated the great fans that brought the air into the cavern, and the algae of the lake had recovered enough to give off a faint, almost twilight glow. In that faint illumination they could see the extent of the devastation.

The sight was desolate beyond all words. What had once been the most magnificent of cities was now a mausoleum, an empty, echoing shell of its former glory.

She could feel Gehn trembling and knew that he was close to tears. All that he had ever known lay within the compass of his sight. His shattered hopes and dreams were here displayed, naked to the eye. Why,

even the great rock that stood in the very midst of the lake had split, like wood before the axe.

"Come," she said gently, meeting Aitrus's eyes. "Let us go from here."

Walking down through the dead streets, their sense of desolation grew. Barely a house stood without great cracks in its walls; barely a wall or gate remained undamaged. From time to time the rubble of a house would block their way and they were forced to backtrack, but eventually they came out by the harbor's edge.

They great statues that had once lined the harbor wall were cracked or fallen. The great merchant fleet that once had anchored here now rested on the harbor's floor. They could see their long shadows thirty, forty feet below the surface.

Anna turned, looking about her. There was no sign anywhere of a boat, and they needed a boat. Without one there was no chance of getting across the lake.

"There are boathouses to the east of the harbor," Aitrus said, "down by the lake's edge. There will be barges there."

But the boathouses were burned, the barges smashed. Someone had made sure they could not get across. Aitrus sighed and sat, his remaining strength almost spent.

"I'll go and look," Anna said, gesturing to Gehn that he should sit with his father and take care of him. "There must be something."

In a moment she was back, her eyes shining. "There is!" she said. "One boat. A small thing, but big enough for us three."

Aitrus's eyes came up, suspicion in them. "Was it tied up?"

She nodded, then frowned. "What is it?"

But Aitrus merely shook his head. "Nothing. Let us go at once."

Gehn helped his father stand, then supported him as they made their way toward where the boat was moored. They were not halfway across when a fearful cry rang out from the lower city at their backs.

All three of them turned, shocked by the sudden sound.

It came again.

Aitrus looked to his wife. "Go to the boat, Ti'ana. Take Gehn and wait there for me. it might be Jiladis."

"But Aitrus…"

"Go to the boat. I'll join you in a while."

Anna hesitated, reluctant to let him go, yet she knew that this, too, was his duty—to help his fellow guildsmen if in need. Taking Gehn's hand she led him away, but all the while she kept glancing back at Aitrus, watching as he slowly crossed the open harbor front, then disappeared into one of the narrow alleyways.

"Come, Gehn," she said. "Let us secure the boat for when your father returns."

§

Aitrus leaned against the wall, doubled up, getting his breath. The pain in his limbs and in his stomach was growing worse and he felt close now to exhaustion. Moreover, he was lost. Or, at least, he had no idea just where the sounds had come from. He had thought it was from somewhere in this locality, but now that he was here there was nothing. The deserted streets were silent.

Across from him a sign hung over the shadowed door of a tavern. There were no words, but the picture could be glimpsed, even through the layer of gray-brown residue. It showed a white, segmented worm, burrowing blindly through the rock. The sight of it made him frown, as if at some vague, vestigial memory. The Blind Worm. Where had he heard mention of that before?

Aitrus straightened, looking up. The windows of the upper story were open, the shutters thrown back.

Even as he looked, there came a loud, distinctive groan.

So he had not been wrong. Whoever it was, they were up there, in that second-floor room.

Aitrus crossed the street then slowly pushed the door open, listening. The groan came again. A set of narrow stairs led up to his right. They were smeared, as if many feet had used them. Cautiously, looking about him all the while, he slipped inside and began to climb them, careful to make no noise.

He was almost at the top when from the room above came a grunt and then another pained groan. Something creaked.

Aitrus stopped then turned his head, looking up into the open doorway just behind him, beyond the turn in the stairs.

A soft, scraping noise came from the room, and then a tiny gasp of pain. That sound released Aitrus. Finding new reserves of energy, he hurried up the final steps.

Standing in the doorway, he gasped, astonished by the sight that met his eyes.

It was a long, low-ceilinged room, with windows overlooking the harbor. In the center of the room a table was overturned and all three chairs. Blood smeared the floor surrounding them, trailing away across the room. And at the end of that trail of blood, attempting to pull himself up onto the window ledge, was Veovis, the broad blade of a butcher's cleaver buried deep in his upper back.

"Veovis!"

But Veovis seemed unaware of his presence. His fingers clutched at the stone ledge as his feet tried to push himself up, his face set in an expression of grim determination.

Horrified, Aitrus rushed halfway across the room, yet even as he did, Veovis collapsed and fell back, groaning.

Aitrus knelt over him.

"Veovis…Veovis, it is Aitrus. What happened here?"

There was a movement in Veovis's face. His eyes blinked and then he seemed to focus on Aitrus's face. And with that came recognition.

"What happened?"

Veovis laughed, then coughed. Blood was on his lips. His voice, when he spoke, came raggedly, between pained breaths.

"My colleague and I…we had a little…*disagreement*."

The ironic smile was pained.

"A'Gaeris?"

Veovis closed his eyes then gave the faintest nod.

"And you fought?"

Veovis's eyes flickered open. "It was no fight…He…" Veovis swallowed painfully. "He stabbed me…when my back was turned."

Veovis grimaced, fighting for his breath. Aitrus thought he was going to die, right there and then, but slowly Veovis's breathing normalized again and his eyes focused on Aitrus once more.

"I would not do it."

"What? What wouldn't you do?"

“The Age he wanted…I would not write it.” A tiny spasm ran through Veovis. Aitrus gripped him.

“Tell me,” he said. “I need to know.”

Veovis almost smiled. “And I need to tell you.”

He swallowed again, then. “He wanted a special place…a place where we could be gods.”

“God?”

Veovis nodded.

It was the ultimate heresy, the ultimate misuse of the great Art: to mistake Writing, the ability to link with preexistent worlds, with true creation. And at the end, Veovis, it seemed, had refused to step over that final line. He looked up at Aitrus now.

Aitrus blinked. Suddenly, the image of his workroom had come to his mind—the trail of footprints leading halfway to the Book but no farther.

“Was that you?” he asked softly. “In my workroom, I mean.”

Veovis took two long breaths, then nodded.

“But why? After all you did, why let *us* live?”

“Because she spoke out for me. Because…she said there was good in me…And she was right…even at the end.”

Veovis closed his eyes momentarily, the pain overwhelming him, then he continued, struggling now to get the words out before there were no more words.

“It was as if there was a dark cloud in my head, poisoning my thoughts. I felt…” Veovis groaned, “nothing. Nothing but hatred, anyway. Blind hatred. Of everything and everyone.”

There was a shout, from outside. Carefully laying Veovis down, he went to the window and looked out, what he saw filling him with dismay.

“What is it?” Veovis asked from below him.

Out on the lake a single boat was heading out toward the distant islands. Standing at its stern, steering it, was the distinctive figure of A’Gaeris. And before him in the boat, laying on the bare planks, their hands and feet bound, were Anna and Gehn.

“It’s A’Gaeris,” he said quietly. “He has Ti’ana and my son.”

“Then you must save her, Aitrus.”

Aitrus gave a bleak cry. “How? A’Gaeris has the only boat, and I am too weak to swim.”

“Then *link* there.”

Aitrus turned and looked down at the dying man. “Where is he taking them?”

Veovis looked up at him, his eyes clear now, as if he had passed beyond all pain. “To K’veer. That’s where we are based. That’s where all the Books are now. We’ve been collecting them. Hundreds of them. Some are in the Book Room, but most are on the Age I made for him. They are in the cabin on the south island. That’s where you link to. The Book of that Age is in my study.”

Aitrus knelt over Veovis again. “I understand. But how does that help me? That’s in K’veer. How do I get *there?”*

In answer, Veovis gestured toward his left breast. There was a deep pocket there, and something in it. Aitrus reached inside and took out a slender book.

“He did not know I had this,” Veovis said, smiling now. “It links to Nidur Gemat. There is a Book there that links directly to my study on K’veer. You can use them to get to the island before he does.”

Aitrus stared at the Book a moment, then looked back at Veovis.

Veovis met his eyes. “Do you *still* not trust me, Aitrus! Then listen. The Book I mentioned. It has a green cover. It is there that A’Gaeris plans to go. It is there that you might trap him. You understand?”

Aitrus hesitated a moment, then, “I will trust you, for I have no choice, and perhaps there *is* some good in you at the last.”

§

The city was receding now. In an hour he would be back in K’veer. A’Gaeris turned from the sight and looked back at his captives where they lay at the bottom of the boat.

He would have killed them there and then, at the harbor’s edge, and thought nothing of it, but the woman had betrayed the fact that her husband was still abroad.

And so, he would use them as his bait. And once he had Aitrus, he would destroy all three of them, for he had not the sentimental streak that had ruined his once-companion, Veovis.

“He will not come for us, you know.”

A’Gaeris looked down at the woman disdainfully. “Of course he’ll come. The man’s a sentimental fool. He came before, didn’t he?”

“But not this time. He’ll wait for you. In D’ni.”

“While you and your son are my captives?” A’Gaeris laughed. “Why, he will be out of his mind with worry, don’t you think?”

He saw how that silenced her. Yes, with the two of them safe in a cell on K’veer he could go back and settle things with Guildsman Aitrus once and for all.

For there was only one boat in all of D’ni now, and he had it.

“No,” he said finally. “He’ll wait there at the harbor until I bring the boat back. And then I’ll have him. Oh yes, Ti’ana. You can be certain of it!”

§

The first Book had linked him to a room in the great house on Nidur Gemat, filled with Veovis’s things. There, after a brief search, he found the second Book that linked to this, more familiar room on the island of K’veer, a place he had often come in better times.

Aitrus stood there a moment, leaning heavily against the desk, a bone-deep weariness making his head spin. Then, knowing he had less than an hour to make his preparations, he looked about him.

The Book with the emerald green cover was on a table in the far corner of the room, beside a stack of other, older Books. Going across to them, Aitrus felt a sudden despair, thinking of what had been done here. So much endeavor had come to naught, here in this room. And for what reason? Envy? Revenge? Or was it simple malice?

Was A’Gaeris mad?

Aitrus groaned, thinking of the end to which Veovis had come. Then, determined to make one final, meaningful effort, he lifted the Book and carried it back over to the desk.

There he sat, opening the Book and reading through the first few pages. After a while he lifted his head, nodding to himself. Here it was, nakedly displayed: what Veovis might, in time, have become; a great Master among Masters, as great, perhaps, as the legendary Ri’Neref.

He began to cough, a hacking, debilitating cough, then put his fingers to his lips. There was blood there now. He, too, was dying.

Taking a cloth from his pocket, Aitrus wiped his mouth and then began, dipping the pen and scoring out essential phrases and adding in others at the end of the book. Trimming and pruning this most perfect of Ages. *Preparing* it.

And all the while he thought of Anna and of Gehn, and prayed silently that they would be all right.

§

A'Gaeris climbed the steps of the harbor at K'veer, Anna and the boy just in front of him, goaded on by the point of his knife.

At the top he paused and, grasping the loose ends of the ropes by which their hands were bound, wrapped them tightly about his left hand. Then, leading the two behind him like a pair of hounds, he went inside the mansion.

K'veer had not been untouched by the tremors, and parts of its impressive architecture had cracked and fallen away into the surrounding lake, yet enough of it remained for it to be recognizable. Anna, who had wondered where they were going, now felt a sense of resignation descend on her.

If Veovis was here then there was nothing Aitrus could do.

Anna glanced at her son. Gehn's face was closed, his eyes sullen, as if this latest twist were no more than could be expected. Yet he was bearing up, for all his trials, and she felt a strange twinge of pride in him for that.

She was about to speak, when she caught the scent of burning. A'Gaeris, too, must have noticed it at the same moment, for he stopped suddenly and frowned.

For a moment he sniffed the air, as if he had been mistaken, then, with a bellow, he began to hurriedly climb the stairs, dragging them along after him.

As they approached the Book Room the smell of burning grew and grew until, at a turn in the stairs, they could see the flickering glow of a fire up ahead of them.

A’Gaeris roared. “My Books!”

For a moment, as he tugged at the rope, Anna almost fell, but she kept her footing. Gehn did, however. She heard his cry and saw that A’Gaeris had let go of the rope that held him. But there was no time to see if he was all right. The next instant she found herself behind A’Gaeris in the doorway to the Book Room. Beyond him the room was brilliantly lit. Smoke bellowed from a stack of burning Books. And just to one side of the flaming pile—a Book in one hand, a flaming torch in the other—stood Aitrus.

A’Gaeris slammed the great door shut behind him, then took a step toward Aitrus, yet even as he did, Aitrus raised the torch and called to him:

“Come any closer and I’ll burn the rest of your Books, A’Gaeris! I know where they are. I’ve *seen* them. In the cabin on the south island. I linked there. I can link there now, unless…”

Anna felt A’Gaeris’s hand reach out and grasp her roughly, and then his arm was about her neck, the dagger raised, its point beneath her neck.

“I have your wife, Aitrus. Go near those Books and I shall kill her.”

“Kill her and I shall destroy your Books. I’ll link through and put them to the torch. And what will you have then, *Master* Philosopher? Nothing. Not now that you’ve killed Veovis.”

Anna could feel A’Gaeris trembling with anger. Any false move and she would be dead.

“Give me that Book,” he said once more in a low growl. “Give it to me, or Ti’ana dies.”

Aitrus was smiling now. He lifted the Book slightly. “This is a masterful work. I know Veovis was proud of it.”

A’Gaeris stared at Aitrus. “It was called Ederat.”

“No,” Aitrus said, his eyes meeting Anna’s. “Veovis had another name for it. He called it Be-el-ze-bub.”

Anna caught her breath. She stared at him, loving him more in that instant than she had ever loved him.

I love you, she mouthed.

Aitrus answered her with his eyes.

“Well?” he asked, returning his attention to A’Gaeris. “Do we have a deal? The Book—and all those Books within—for my wife?”

But A’Gaeris simply laughed.

Aitrus lowered the torch. His eyes went to the cover of the Book, then, with a final loving look at Anna, he placed the hand that held the burning torch upon the glowing panel.

A’Gaeris howled. Thrusting Anna away from him he ran across the room.

“Aitrus!” she yelled as his figure shimmered and vanished. “Aitrus!”

But he was gone. The great Book fell with a thud to the floor beside the burning stack.

A’Gaeris threw himself at it in unseemly haste and almost wrenched the cover from the spine forcing it open.

Anna watched, her heart in her throat as, his chest heaving, A’Gaeris looked across at her and, with a smile that was half snarl, placed his hand against the descriptive panel and linked.

§

Even as he linked into the cave, A’Gaeris stumbled, doubling up in pain. The air was burning, the reek of sulphur choking. The first breath seared his lungs. Putting out an arm, A’Gaeris staggered forward, howling, looking about him desperately for the Linking Book back to D’ni. Yet even as he did, a great crack appeared in the floor of the cavern. The heat intensified. There was a glimpse of brilliant orange-redness, one stark moment of realization, and then the rock slab on which he stood tilted forward, A’Gaeris’s shrill cry of surprise cut off as he tumbled into the molten flow.

And then silence. The primal, unheard silence of the great cauldron of creation.

§

Anna cried quietly, crouching over the green-covered Book and studying the glowing image there.

For a moment or two there was the temptation to follow him: to end it all, just as Aitrus had. Then someone hammered on the Book Room door.

It brought her back to herself. *Gehn.*

Anna turned to face the smoldering pile of ashes that had once been D'ni Books, then dropped the green-covered Book upon the rest. Sparks scattered. A cloud of smoke wafted up toward the high ceiling of the room. A moment later, flames began to lick the burnished leather of the cover.

For a moment she simply stared, feeling the gap there now where the other book of her life had been, just as Tasera had described it. Then, getting to her feet again, she turned, even as the knocking came again, more urgently this time, and began to walk across.

EPILOGUE

The sun was edging above the mountains far to the east as the figure of a woman emerged from the lip of the volcano, cradling a sleeping child. The desert floor was still in deep shadow. It lay like a dark sea about the bright, black-mouthed circle of the caldera. The woman paused, lifting her chin, slowly scanning the surrounding desert, then began to descend the rock-littered slope, her shadow stretched out long and thin behind her, black against the dawn's red.

As she came closer to the cleft, a light wind began to blow, lifting the dark strands of her hair behind her. Sand danced across the rock then settled. The woman seemed gaunt and wraithlike, and the child in her arms was but skin and bone, yet there was a light in her eyes, a vitality, that was like the fire from the deep earth.

Seeing the cleft, she slowed, looking about her once more, then went across and knelt, laying the child down gently on a narrow ledge of rock. Taking the two packs from her shoulders, she set them down. Then, using her hands and feet to find her way, she ducked down into the dark gash of the cleft.

There was a pool down there at the foot of the cleft. In the predawn darkness it was filled with stars, reflected from the sky far overhead. Like a shadow, she knelt beside it, scooping up a handful of the pure, cool

water, and drank. Refreshed, she turned, still kneeling, and looked about her. It was cool down here, and there was water. With a little work it could be more.

Anna nodded, then stood, wiping her hands against her shirt. “Here,” she said. “We’ll begin again here.”

MYST

THE BOOK OF D’NI

RAND MILLER

with david wingrove

TO THE DEDICATED TEAM AT CYAN

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Even as we bring you this third book, which further uncovers the D’ni and their history, we realize that we have merely scratched the surface of this fascinatingly rich civilization, but have added a crucial piece to this ever enlarging puzzle. And this latest effort that we now present to you could have only been possible with the continuing effort of a core group of dedicated individuals.

It is again our pleasure to have uncovered more of these historic and stunning past events of a civilization that continues to live and to teach. Yet this work would not have been possible if not for the assistance of Chris Brandkamp, Richard Watson, and Ryan Miller along with the long hours spent by our friend, David Wingrove. This particular task of discovery was especially rewarding to each of us.

So it is again to these four friends that I extend my sincerest thanks.

PROLOGUE

A SEABIRD CALLS.

THE UNKNOWING ONE STANDS AT THE RAIL

PEACE. THE CIRCLE CLOSED.

THE LAST WORD WRITTEN.

--FROM THE KOROKH JIMAH

VV. 13245-46

The cavern was silent. A faint mist drifted on the surface of the water, underlit by the dull orange glow that seemed to emanate from deep within the lake. Vast walls of granite climbed on every side while overhead, unseen, unsensed, a solid shelf of rock a mile thick shut off all view of stars and moon.

Islands littered the lake, twisted spikes of darkness jutting from the level surface of the water, and there, on the far side of the cavern, one single, massive rock, split yet still standing, like the splintered trunk of a tree, its peak hidden in the darkness.

Beyond it lay the city, wreathed in stillness, its ancient buildings clinging to the walls of the cavern.

D'ni slept, dreamless and in ruins. And yet the air was fresh. It moved, circulating between the caverns, the distant noise of the vast rotating blades little more than the suggestion of a sound, a faint, whumping pulse *beneath* the silence.

The mist parted briefly as a boat slid across the waters, the faintest ripple marking its passage, and then it, too, was gone, vanished into the blackness.

It was night in D'ni. A night that had lasted now for almost seventy years.

In the streets of the city the mist coiled on the cold stone of ancient cobbles like something living. Yet nothing lived there now; only the mosses and fungi that grew from every niche and cranny.

Empty it was, as though it had stood thus for a thousand years. Level after level lay open to the eye, abandoned and neglected. A thousand empty lanes, ten thousand empty rooms, a desolate landscape of crumbling walls and fallen masonry everywhere one looked.

In the great curve between the city's marbled flanks lay the harbor, the shadows of sunken boats in its glowing depths, and across the harbor's mouth a great arch of stone, Kerath's Arch, as it was known, its pitted surface webbed with cracks.

Silence. A preternatural silence. And then a sound. Faint at first and distant, and yet clear. The tap, tap, tap of metal against stone.

High above, in the narrow lanes of the upper city, a shadow stopped beneath a partly fallen gate and turned to look. The sound had come from the far end of the cavern; from one of the islands scattered on the lake out there.

Mist swirled, then silence fell again.

And then new sounds: a whirring, high-pitched mechanical screech, followed by the low burr of a power drill. And then the tapping once again, the sound of it echoing out across the water.

K'veer. The noises were coming from K'veer.

Two miles across the lake and there it is, the island rising like a huge black corkscrew from the glowing lake, its once crisp outline softened by a recent rockfall.

Coming closer, the noise grows in volume, the sound of drilling constant now, as is the clang, clang, clang of massive hammers pounding the stone. The island shakes beneath the onslaught, the carved stone trembling like a sounding bell.

But no one is woken by that dreadful din. The ancient rooms are dark and empty. All, that is, but one, at the very foot of the island, down beneath the surface of the lake. There, deep in the rock, lies the oldest room of all, a chamber of marbled pillars and cold stone, sealed off by an angry father to teach his son a lesson.

Now, forty years on, that same chamber is filled with busy men in dark, protective suits. Their brows beaded with sweat, they toil beneath the arc lights, a dozen of them standing between the two big hydraulic props, working at the face of the wall with hammer and drill, while others scamper back and forth, lifting and carrying the fallen stone, stacking it in a great heap on the far side of the chamber.

A figure stands beside the left-hand prop, looking on. Atrus, son of Gehn, once-prisoner in this chamber. After a while, he glances at the open notebook in his hand, then looks up again, calling out something to those closest to him.

A face looks up and nods, then turns back. The message is passed along the line.

There is a moment's pause. A welcome silence.

Walking across, Atrus crouches between two of the men and leans forward, examining the wall, prising his fingers deep into the crack, then turns and shakes his head.

He stands back, letting them continue, watching them go to it with a vengeance, the noise deafening now, as if all of them know that one more push will see the job through.

Slowly the chamber fills with dust and grit. And then one of them withdraws and, straightening up, cuts the power to his drill. Turning, he lifts his protective visor and grins.

All about him the others stand back, looking on.

Atrus returns to the wall and, crouching, pushes his hand deep into the crack, edging this way and that, feeling high and low. Satisfied, he eases back and, taking a marker from his pocket, stands, drawing an outline on the stone. The outline of a door.

At his signal, one of the drill men steps forward and begins to cut along the mark.

Swiftly it's done. A dozen hammer blows and the stone falls away.

The stone is quickly cleared, and as the rest look on, Atrus steps forward one last time. He holds a cutting tool with a chunky barrel the thickness of his arm. Placing the circle of its teeth about the circle of the lock—a circle that overlaps the thick frame of the door—he braces himself, then gently squeezes the trigger, letting it bite slowly into the surface. Only then, when the cutter has a definite grip on the metal, does he begin to push, placing his whole weight behind it.

There is a growling whine, a sharp, burning smell, different in kind from the earlier smells of stone and dust and lubricant. And then, abruptly, it's over. There is the clatter of the lock as it falls into the corridor beyond, the descending whine of the drill as it stutters into silence.

Setting the drill down, he raises his visor, then pulls the protective helmet off and lets it fall.

§

Atrus straightened and, with a single meaningful glance at the watching men, turned back to face the doorway. Forty years he had waited for this. Forty long years.

Placing his booted foot against the surface, he pushed hard, feeling the metal resist at first, then give.

Slowly, silently, it swung back.

A good D'ni door, he thought, with good stone hinges that never rust. A door built to last.

And as the door swung back he saw for the first time in a long while the empty corridor and, at its end, the twist of steps that led up into the house, where, long ago, his father, Gehn, had taught him how to write. Where he had first learned the truth about D'ni. Yes, and other things, too.

Irras came and stood by his shoulder. "Will you not go through, Master Atrus?"

Atrus turned, meeting the young man's eyes. "One should not hurry moments like this, Irras. I have waited forty years. Another forty seconds will not harm."

Irras lowered his eyes, abashed.

"Besides," Atrus went on, "we do not know yet whether D'ni is occupied or not."

"You think it might be?" The look of shock on Irras's face was almost comical.

"If it *is*," Atrus said, "then they will know we are here. We've made enough noise to wake the dead."

"Then maybe we should arm ourselves."

"Against other D'ni?" Atrus smiled. "No, Irras. If anyone's here, they will be friends, not foes. Like us, they will have returned for a reason."

Atrus turned back, looking toward the steps, then, brushing the dust from his leather gloves and boots, he stepped through, into the dimly lit corridor.

PART ONE

RIVERS OF FIRE. EVEN THE ROCKS BURN

AN ISLAND RISES FROM THE SEA.

DARK MAGIC IN AN ERRANT PHRASE.

THE PEOPLE BOW TO THE LORD OF ERROR.

--FROM THE EJEMAH TERAM

BOOK SEVEN. VV.328-31

Seabirds wheeled and called in the air above the bay, a flutter of white above the blue. It was hot, and, looking at the village, Marrim drew her hair back from her face, then gathered the braided strands together, fastening them at the nape of her neck. But for her father she would have had it cut like a man's long ago. After all, she did a man's job, why should she not wear her hair like a man's? But she was loathe to upset her father. It was hard enough for him to understand all the changes that had come to Averone, let alone comprehend the urge to explore and understand that had been woken in his youngest daughter.

From where she stood, on the promontory, the whole of her small world was open to her gaze. For all her childhood it had been enough. The six great circular lodge houses, the river, the broad fields where they had planted the crops, and, beyond them, the woods where they had hunted and played. World enough, until Atrus and Catherine appeared.

Now she could barely imagine how it had been before they'd come. How she had ever survived without this urge in her, this need to know.

And now, almost as suddenly as it had begun, it was to end. Only that morning they had dismantled the last of the workshops and cleared the ground where it had been. So Atrus had promised the elders of the village when he had first come here, yet Marrim could not understand why it had to be. They had come so far so quickly. Why *did* it have to end? For certain, she herself could not easily return to being what she was. No. She had changed. And this world, while it still drew her emotionally, was no longer big enough for her. She wanted more. Atrus's Books had opened her mind to the infinite possibilities that existed, and she wanted to see, if not all, then at least *some* of those possibilities.

And yet tomorrow they would be gone. Atrus and Catherine, and all they stood for.

There had to be a way to prevent that. Or if not, a way of going with them. If only Atrus would ask. But even then there were the elders—her father among them—and they would never agree. As much as they liked Atrus, they did not welcome the changes he had brought to Averone. They saw the excitement in their children's eyes and to them it was a threat. Atrus had understood that. It was why he had agreed to destroy all that he had built here once it had served his needs. But he could not destroy what was in her head. Nor the seeds he had planted in the heads of others, such as Irras and Carrad. Marrim knew they shared her frustration. They, too, felt constrained now by this tiny world of theirs.

She let her thoughts grow still watching the movements down below her, in the village. Each of the great lodge houses had four large doorways, at north, south, east, and west, the massive entrances framed by the polished jarras trunks—cut from the largest trees in the woods. As she looked, three people emerged from the south doorway of her own lodge, their figures tiny against the great boles of the ancient trees; yet she recognized them at once.

Atrus stood to the left, the distinctive lenses that he wore pulled down over his face, his long cloak hanging loose in the windless air. Beside him, in a long flowing gown of green, stood Catherine, her hair tied back. Facing them, talking to them, was her father.

She groaned. Doubtless her father was asking Atrus not to interfere. And Atrus, being the man he was, would respect her father's wishes.

Her spirits low, she began to walk back down to the village, heading toward the river, away from her own lodge and the three figures who stood there debating her future. And as she walked she remembered the first time she had seen Atrus and Catherine, that morning when they had, so it seemed, stepped from the air and into their lives. Wide-eyed, the villagers had come out from their lodges to stare at the two strangers, while the elders quickly gathered to form a welcome party.

She remembered how difficult that first meeting had been, with neither party able to speak the other's language. And yet even then Atrus had found ways to communicate with them. His hands had drawn pictures in the air, and they had somehow understood. He wanted their help. She

remembered the gesture clearly: how he had put his arms straight out toward the elders, palms open, and then slowly had drawn them in, as if to embrace something to his chest.

In the days that had followed, she had barely let them out of her sight, hovering at the back of a circle of curious youngsters who had followed the two strangers everywhere they went. And slowly she had begun to pick up the odd word or two until, emboldened by familiarity, she had dared to speak to the woman. She remembered vividly how Catherine had turned to face her, the surprise in her eyes slowly turning to a smile. She had repeated the words Marrim had uttered, then gently beckoned her across.

So it had begun, four years ago this summer.

Marrim smiled, recalling the long hours she had spent learning the D'ni tongue, and afterward—in the library on Chroma'Agana—how she had sat at her books long into the night, learning the written script.

Even now she had not mastered it fully. But now it did not matter. For tonight, after the feast, they would be gone, the Linking Book burned, that whole world of experience barred to her, *if* the elders had their way.

The thought of it filled her with dread. It would be like locking her in a room and throwing away the key.

No, she thought. Worse than that. Much worse.

§

Irras found her crouched on the riverbank.

"Marrim?"

She glanced up at him, then returned her gaze to the surface of the water.

"Marrim? What is it?"

She answered without looking at him. "You *know* what it is."

"Look. I know you're disappointed, Marrim, we all are, but it can't be helped. The elders only let us help Atrus on the understanding that once he made the breakthrough that was it."

Marrim was silent. She picked up a handful of pebbles and, one by one, began to throw them into the slow-moving stream.

Irras watched her a moment, combing his fingers back through his dark, fine hair. Then, sighing. “Come on, Marrim. Don’t spoil things. You knew this day would come.”

“I know,” she said. “But it’s hard. I mean, it’s not like going hunting, say, or fishing. There, no matter how far you venture, you come back and you’re the same, unchanged. But the journey *we’ve* been on…”

Irras was silent for a long time, thinking about what she’d said, then he shrugged. “You’ll be okay. You’ll settle again.”

“Maybe…”

Irras stared at her, surprised by the uncertainty in her voice.

Yet before he could speak again, to reassure her, Carrad came running up, his broad chest rising and falling from his exertions, sweat beading the big knuckle of his skull.

“Irras! Marrim! You’re wanted! Atrus has called a meeting!”

Marrim looked down. No doubt he wanted to thank them and say goodbye before the feast, because there would be no time for informal farewells later on. But right now she didn’t feel like farewells.

“I saw him,” she said, “speaking to my father.”

Carrad nodded. “Mine, too.”

She looked up. He at least understood what she was feeling, she could see it in his eyes.

“I wish…”

“What?” she said gently, brought out of herself by the sight of his suffering.

“I wish we’d never started this.”

Yes. But it was too late now. It would have been best for them all if they had never learned about D’ni and Books and all the rest of it, but now…

Irras’s voice broke into her thoughts. “*Well?* Are you going to keep Atrus waiting?”

Marrim looked to Carrad, then back to Irras. In appearance the two young men were like rock and wood, the one so broad and solid, the other so agile and slender; but on the inside they were much alike.

“No,” she said, knowing that whatever she was feeling, it was not Atrus’s fault: He had been as good as a father to them, after all. “You’re right, Irras. Let us not keep Master Atrus waiting.”

§

The hut was the last of the new buildings to remain standing, and in an hour or so it, too, would be gone, the dark earth beneath its floor raked over, as if nothing had ever been there on the site. Looking at it, Atrus sighed. They had had happy times here, working, laughing, teaching the young people how to use their quick and nimble minds. He would miss that. Indeed, it was only now, at the end, that he realized just how much he was going to miss it.

Atrus turned, looking to Catherine. She was crouched, packing the last of their books into a knapsack. He watched her a moment, the familiarity of her shape, her every movement, ingrained in him. There were lines at her neck now, and a fine web of lines about her eyes and mouth, but these only made her more dear to him. The D'ni blood in him made him age the tiniest bit slower than she, and there was always the consciousness that one day he would be alone, without her by his side, but that only made him savor each moment that much more.

She glanced up, noticing him watching her, and smiled. Then, seeing the concern in his eyes, she stood and came across.

"What is it?"

He hesitated, then. "I wish there was another way."

"Is that why you want to talk to them?"

He nodded.

"And what will you say?"

"I don't know. But I feel I ought to say something. As it is, I feel as if we're simply abandoning them." He raised a hand. "I know we agreed to all this long ago, but I didn't know then how I would feel at the end."

"I know…" There was a sadness in her face that mirrored his own. "But at least they got to see D'ni."

§

"Marrim, Irras, Carrad…come in."

There was an awkwardness about Atrus's manner that was strange. It was almost as if the years between his arrival and his imminent departure had melted away, leaving them all strangers again. The three young Averonese also moved awkwardly as they stepped into the shadows of the hut, unable to meet their friend's eyes, their every gesture a denial of what was happening. This was difficult for them. More difficult than anything they'd ever done.

Marrim, particularly, seemed eclipsed. She was usually so bright, so full of life. Catherine, watching her from where she stood behind her husband, felt her heart go out to the young woman. It would be hard for her to stay here. There was such a hunger in her for new things, and what was new in Averone?

"Friends…" Atrus said, as they sat on the long bench facing him. "I…" He made a tiny noise of exasperation, then, leaning toward them, his hands extended in exhortation, said, "I wish this wasn't happening. I wish…"

They were watching him now.

Atrus's voice, when it came again, was subdued, as if he understood that even uttering these words might not help. "I wish you could come with us. I wish that more than anything."

Catherine saw the small, shuddering movement in each of them. The words had touched them. It was what they wanted. Wanted more than anything. And somehow, strangely, it helped them to know that Atrus wanted that too.

Marrim looked from side to side to her friends, then spoke. "We understand."

"Yes." The single word sounded bleak. It all came down to this. Atrus had given his word, and he could not break it. Indeed, he would not be the man he was if that were possible. To be what one said one was… that, too Atrus, was of the essence. And he had instilled that into these young people. What one said, what one wrote—these things mattered. As much as life and death.

"I wanted to give each of you something," Atrus said gently. "To remember us by."

Atrus stood and went across, lifting three small parcels from the table at the side. Catherine had noticed them earlier and guessed what they were. Books. D'ni Books.

He returned, then leaned across the table, setting a parcel before each of them, then sat again, waiting for them to open them. But none of them made even the vaguest movement to unwrap the gifts.

"Well?" Atrus said after a moment, clearly trying to understand what was going on. "Have I done the wrong thing?"

It was Marrim who answered him. "We thank you for the gifts, Master Atrus, but we cannot accept them. We have finished with all that now, and we must settle here, in Averone."

But Catherine saw the look of longing in her eyes, quickly suppressed, and felt almost giddy at the thought of what they were doing here. Atrus and she had not even *begun* to imagine the effect they would have on these young people.

She looked away, unable to bear it any longer. Yet even as she did there was a knock on the door.

Atrus looked up, even as the young Averonese turned in their seats.

The door swung slowly open.

"Gevah!" Atrus said, standing and giving a tiny bow.

The old man looked about him, taking in the situation at a glance, then, with a nod to Atrus and Catherine, he stepped inside, closing the door behind him.

"Forgive me for intruding," he began, "but I have come from a meeting of the elders."

Catherine saw the three young people deflate at the words. If there had been any glimmer of hope, it had died in that moment.

"They asked me to come at once," Gevah continued, "before a great mistake was made."

Atrus blinked, then. "You can tell the elders that I will keep my word. These presents are but a token. I…"

"You misunderstand me, Master Atrus," Gevah said, interrupting him. "The mistake I am talking of is not yours but ours. *You* have been as good as your word. No, we have discussed the matter at length and are of one mind. The link must remain open."

Atrus simply stared at the old man. The young people were also staring, but their eyes were bright now and there were the ghosts of disbelieving smiles on their faces.

"Averone must remain Averone," Gevah said, "so it is right that the workshops should be pulled down. But there have been other changes.

Changes that cannot be pulled down and raked over."

Gevah looked at the three young people who were sitting there and smiled.

"Oh, we are old, but we are not stupid. We have eyes, yes, and imaginations, too. We see how you have changed, and we are proud of you, just as Master Atrus is proud of you."

Catherine could contain herself no longer. "Then they can come with us? To Chroma'Agana? And D'ni?"

Gevah turned to her. "On one condition. That they return here, one month in two, to serve as teachers to our young, to pass on the skills they have learned."

And now, as one, the three jumped up, whooping elatedly and hugging each other, crying with joy. Even old Gevah was included in their hugs.

When things had died down, Atrus asked, "What made you change your mind, Gevah?"

The old man smiled. "The fact that you did what you had promised you would do, and without protest. It made us think. It made us see how much we had to lose if you were gone."

Atrus stood, then came round the table and embraced the old man. "Then let it be so. We shall take great care of these young people. And they will return, to pass on what they know. They will make you doubly proud of them, Gevah."

"I know," the old man said, stepping back, his eyes dwelling long on the three young people. "In fact, I am certain of it."

§

It was very late when Atrus and Catherine returned to their stall in the great lodge house. Now that the link was to remain, the feast had been a merry one, all of their young helpers in such a mood that it was hard to believe that they had all just volunteered for yet more years of long and grueling work.

Settling down beside Catherine, Atrus yawned, then gave a small chuckle.

"What now?" Catherine whispered, snuggling in to his side.

He looked up at the great raftered roof of the lodge house high above and grinned. “The look on Marrim’s face when she finally opened her present,” he whispered. “Why, you’d have thought I’d wrapped up the sun itself and given it to her!”

Catherine nodded thoughtfully, then. “She’s a hungry one. Starving for knowledge and for strange exotic places. Oh, I know that hunger, Atrus.”

“Yes,” he said quietly, conscious of the hundreds of sleeping Averonese surrounding them. “And now she’ll have a chance. We can teach her, Catherine. Teach her how to write.”

“Yes…”

Atrus was silent for a long time after that. He lay there on his back, his arm curled about Catherine, unable to sleep, staring up into the dark, thinking about what lay ahead.

The breakthrough to D’ni was only the first step. The real work had yet to begin—the gathering in of the Books, the searching of the Ages. It would be a slow, laborious task.

Catherine must have sighed, though she was unaware of it. Atrus lifted himself up onto one elbow and looked down into her face. “What is it?” he whispered.

She met his eyes. “What if no one survived? What if we’re alone?”

“We won’t know—not until we’ve tried. But I can’t believe there aren’t some D’ni somewhere. Can you?”

She smiled, calmed by his certainty. “No.”

“Good,” he said. “We’ll worry about all that in the morning.”

§

“Marrim! Marrim! Look at this! Have you ever seen the like?”

Marrim squeezed past Irras then stopped dead, astonished by the sight that met her eyes.

“Books!”

The long, low room was filled to bursting with books: on shelves on the walls, in piles on the floor, and on both desks; even stacked up on the tall-backed chair that rested behind the bigger of the desks. More

books than she had ever dared imagine. Why, she could spend years in this one room alone and never read half of them!

She turned, excited, to find Atrus standing there.

"Master Atrus…"

He stepped past her, looking about him.

"This was my father's room," he said. "His study."

Atrus walked across and lifted something from among the books on the desk—an elaborate-looking pipe. He lifted it to his nose and sniffed, then placed it back, a strange expression on his face.

"He must have been a clever man," Irras offered.

Atrus turned. "Clever…yes." But he said no more.

"There are Books here," he said after a moment, his pale eyes narrowed. "D'ni Books. There might be functional Ages in some of them. Marrim, go through the shelves and the piles on the floor. Gather them together. But don't be tempted by them. Some of these worlds are dangerous. That's why we use the suit, remember? Your task is to locate them and bring them to me. Afterward, when all are gathered in, we can decide which ones to visit."

The two youngsters nodded.

"By the way," Atrus said, "where's Carrad?"

"With Catherine," Irras answered. "They found a boat. They're trying to repair it."

"Ah…" Atrus nodded, but Marrim, watching him, noticed how distant he seemed.

Atrus was silent a moment, then: "My father was a secretive man. Maybe he has hidden things somewhere in the room. Search everything. The walls, the floors, everything." He paused. "You know what you're looking for?"

"We know," Marrim said.

"Good." Atrus nodded, then quickly left.

Marrim turned full circle, excited once again now that Atrus had gone. "All these books," she said, looking at Irras. "Just imagine…"

§

Catherine looked across as Atrus came down the stone steps into the lamp-lit cavern.

"Marrim *said* you'd found a boat," he said, his voice echoing slightly in that enclosed space.

"Yes," she said, glancing to her side, where Carrad was busy repairing the hull of the ancient craft, his closely shaven head bobbing up and down as he worked. "It needs a little care and attention, but Carrad knows all about making boats."

"Good." Atrus stepped down onto the quay. The lamp on the wall behind him threw his shadow across the bright surface of the water. He stood there saying nothing, but something in his manner told her that he wanted to talk.

Reaching beside her, she touched Carrad's arm. "Ill not be long." Then, straightening up, she went over to Atrus.

"Come," she said. "Let's go outside."

The main cavern was dark and silent. "Sepulchral" was the word that sprang to her mind; like a single great building that had been long abandoned by its gigantic owners. Sitting there on the stone ledge, looking out across the still, flat surface of the water toward the ancient city, Catherine understood for the first time why Atrus had been driven to return.

"It must be difficult for you, coming back here."

"I was only a child," he answered, his eyes looking past her toward the great twist of rock on the far side of the cavern. "I didn't understand just how much he had twisted things in his mind. I had to unlearn so much that he taught me. I thought I'd thrown him off, but his shadow is everywhere here. I wasn't so conscious of it when we made the breakthrough, but today, standing in his room, I could almost see him…"

"Then maybe that's why you're here. To throw off his shadow."

He was silent a while, then: "What I *really* fear is that he's already destroyed all of the Books."

"Why should he do that?"

"It's just something I remember him saying. He used to warn me against using the Books. He said they were unstable and that it would be dangerous to venture into those Ages. But that was a lie. Those Books were all proper Books, approved by the Guilds, checked regularly by the Maintainers. They would have been carefully written—*designed* to be

stable. And he would have known that. So why warn me about them unless he didn't want me going into them and finding other D'ni?"

"Yes, but that doesn't mean he *destroyed* them."

"Maybe not. But I know how he thought. He had no respect for them. And on our Book searches, though he never brought back anything but blank Books, he always noted down where the Books were."

"You don't know that."

"I fear that we'll look and look and find nothing, because there'll be nothing to find. You know the depth of his malice, Catherine. You of all people should know that he was quite capable of something like that. Even so…"

Atrus turned, the sentence incomplete. Catherine looked up and saw that Marrim was standing in the doorway.

"What is it? Atrus asked, going over to her.

"This," Marrim said, handing Atrus a notebook. "I found it tucked away at the back of one of the drawers."

He stared at it, amazed. "But this…"

"…was your father's," Catherine said, stepping up beside him. She opened it, flicking through the pages quickly, then handed it back.

"Maybe it's here," she said.

Decades of understanding between the two made him understand her at once. "His journals?"

"One of his journals," she said. "You say he kept a record of the Book searches. Well, maybe it's here. If so, we'll know where to look. It could save us weeks."

"Yes." Yet as Atrus looked back at the notebook his face darkened.

"Shadows…" he said.

"Yes," Catherine answered him. "But these shadows might just cast some light."

§

Sensing that Atrus needed to be left for a time, Catherine took the three young Averonese back to Chroma'Agana, then returned alone.

She found him in his father's study, seated at Gehn's desk, the notebook open before him.

Atrus looked up as she came in and sighed. “It’s all here,” he said. “Diaries, observations, notes to Ages he was writing. And other things.”

“And the maps?”

He shook his head. “Catherine?...Have you ever read of the Great King?”

“No…Unless they mean Kerath.”

“I don’t think so. My father’s notes are unclear, but it appears he existed long before the late kings.”

“What is that?” She asked, reaching out to take the notebook.

“My father’s notes on the myths and legends of D’ni. Some of it’s quite detailed, other parts, like the mention of the Great King, are vague. From the notations at the back of the book it seems that Gehn trawled all kinds of sources. It’s a regular hodgepodge of fact and rumor, but a lot of it reads like old wives’ tales. You know the kind of thing…fireside tales, invented to make children’s eyes pop!”

Catherine was turning the pages, reading an entry here, an entry there. “So why the interest in this Great King?”

“Because I’ve never heard mention of him before, and because he was supposed to have made various prophesies.”

“Prophesies?”

“Again, it’s vague. But there are one or two instances scattered throughout the book. Here…” He took the book back and quickly searched through the early pages, returning it to her a moment later. “That entry there, in green ink.”

Catherine read it through, then looked up at him. “It’s strange, certainly.”

She closed the book, then set it down. “I don’t think anyone can see clearly what lies ahead.”

“Nor I.”

§

They moored the boat at the foot of the granite steps and carried their equipment up. Behind the great sweep of marbled flagstones that bordered the harbor was an open space that had once been a great square. There they set up camp, clearing away the debris, then placed a ring of

lamps about them, the ancient fire-marbles burning brightly in that perpetual twilight.

Standing at the foot of the great curved slope of buildings that rose level after level, climbing the cavern's massive walls, Marrim felt a mixture of awe and sorrow: awe at the scale on which the D'ni had once built; sorrow that she had not witnessed it in its living splendor.

It was strange, of course, for she was used to the shadows falling downward—the natural shadows of a sunlit world—whereas here everything was underlit, the faint glow from the water giving the whole place an eerie feel. Everywhere she looked was ruin. Ruin beyond anything she had imagined possible. Cracked walls and fallen masonry. And here and there huge pits, large enough to swallow up whole mansions. Strange mosses had begun to grow in the cracks, and here and there an odd lichen splashed subdued color on a rock.

Overall it had a strange, desolate beauty, and when Atrus came and stood beside her, she asked him what had happened to cause such devastation.

Atrus had never spoken to them of this, and, listening to the tale—a tale Atrus's grandmother had first told him long after the event—Marrim found her imagination waking so that she could almost see the dark cloud slowly fill the cavern, and, afterward, Veovis and his ally, A'Gaeris, as they walked through the stricken alleyways of D'ni, their cart of death pushed before them.

When Atrus had finished, Marrim turned to him. "Master Atrus… why didn't they come back?"

"Perhaps they did."

Yes, she thought. And saw this. And hurried back to the Ages in which they had found safe haven, knowing that D'ni was at an end.

Catherine, who had been organizing the laying out of the bedrolls, now came across. "Shall we go and have a look?" she asked, gesturing toward the nearby streets.

"Marrim?" Atrus asked, turning to her. "Would you like to come with us?"

Marrim nodded, surprised that he'd asked. "Are we to begin the search?"

"Not today. Tomorrow, maybe, once things are better organized. I just thought you might like to look about a little before we begin in

earnest.” He reached down and, picking up one of the lamps, handed it to her. “Here, Marrim. Light our way.”

Marrim took the lamp and, holding it up, led them on, across the littered square toward a crumbling stone archway that marked the entrance to the lowest of D’ni’s many districts.

“This is Kerathen, named after the last king,” he said, pointing up to the symbols carved into the partly fallen lintel of the arch. “This is where the D’ni boatmen once lived, and the traders and innkeepers.”

“And A’Gaeris,” Marrim said, staring through the arch wide-eyed, as if at paradise itself.

“Yes. And A’Gaeris.”

§

They walked for an hour, then stopped, resting on the balcony of a two-story house, the windows of which were on a level with the top of the great arch that formed a giant gateway to the harbor. Looking down from there, Atrus recalled the first time he had stood there, with his father, in what seemed several lifetimes ago.

Even Marrim was subdued now. And not surprisingly. The sheer extent of the devastation was overwhelming. It was enough to eclipse the brightest spirit.

“It’s too much,” Catherine said quietly. “We cannot repair *this*.”

But Atrus shook his head. “It only seems too much. We have a whole lifetime to work at this. Not only that, but we shall find others to help us in the task.”

Marrim, who had been looking out across the lake, now turned and looked to him. “How many people were there, here in D’ni, Master Atrus?”

“A million. Maybe more.”

The thought of it clearly amazed her. “And all of them could write?”

“It depends what you mean. The D’ni were highly literate, but few could write Ages. That was something the Guilds taught. One would have needed to be a Guildsman to do that.”

“And the women?”

Atrus looked to Catherine and smiled. “I know of only two women who ever learned to write.”

§

The next few weeks were hectic. In the absence of his father’s charts, Atrus drew up detailed maps of the harbor-side districts, then divided his young helpers into teams of six. Two of those teams, led by Marrim and Irras, went out into the streets and alleyways of lower D’ni to search for Books; another, under Carrad, began the task of raising the sunken boats from the floor of the harbor and repairing them; and a fourth, headed by Catherine, went back and forth between the harbor and K’veer, bringing back food and supplies from Chroma’Agana and Averone. The fifth team, supervised by Atrus himself, began the job of clearing a storehouse for whatever Books were found, while he, in whatever spare moments remained, worked on maps of D’ni.

At first progress was slow. There were few big houses in the lower levels, and thus few private Book Rooms, and they quickly discovered that the public Book Rooms had already been plundered by Gehn and most of the Guild Books destroyed, just as Atrus had feared. Even so, by the end of the second week they had a total of thirty-four Books. Finished with the maps, Atrus began the task of reading and cataloging them.

Marrim, returning from a long and fruitless search of the Ne’weril district, went in to see Atrus, who was sitting at his makeshift desk in the storehouse.

“Forgive me, Master Atrus,” she began, “but why are we waiting?”

“Waiting?”

“To begin the search of the Ages.”

He smiled tolerantly. “I understand your enthusiasm, Marrim, but this is not something to be rushed. We need to have some idea of the scale of the venture before embarking upon it. Meanwhile there is much to do here. We have to build up a stock of blank Linking Books, and ink and writing materials. Unless you know a way of returning from an Age *without* a Linking Book?”

A Faint color came to Marrim’s cheeks. She bowed her head.

“Let us gather in every Book we can find,” Atrus went on. “*Then* we can decide which to visit. You see, some of the Books are damaged, Marrim. Pages are missing or have been torn or burned. Others are clearly old and I’d guess were little used by their owners, even though they bear the Maintainer’s inspection stamp. What we need to find are newer, more healthy Ages, for it is in those that we are most likely to find our survivors.”

“And have we found any such Ages yet?”

“Two. But it might well turn out that the Books we find in these lower districts were all visited—and corrupted—by Veovis and his ally. It may be that only those from more distant, higher districts remained untouched. That is why I am taking great care to mark on the maps where each Book was found and the circumstances of its discovery. Such details might prove crucial when we come to organize the next stage of our search.”

“Then ought we not to be searching the higher districts first?”

Atrus laughed. “Is that what you wish to do, young Marrim?”

She nodded.

“Then that is what you *shall* do.” He turned and searched among the papers on his desk until he located one of the maps he had finished only the day before. “Here,” he said, handing it to her, “this is where my grandfather and his family once lived. Jaren was a Guild district. If there are Books anywhere, they will be there. But take supplies enough for several days, Marrim, unless you fancy trekking back down to the harbor every night.”

“And you, Master Atrus? Won’t you come with us this once?”

He stared at her, surprised by her request, then nodded. “Perhaps I will come along. This once.”

§

Though he had been on many Booksearches with his father, Atrus had never stood within these walls, never walked among these strangely familiar rooms, and now that he did he wondered just why Gehn had not brought him here.

Anna. That was why. It reminded Gehn too much of Anna.

He walked on, aware for the first time in his life just how strong the connection was between himself and this ancient place. A connection of blood. And though he was only one part in four D'ni, that did not dilute what he felt.

No wonder Gehn became obsessed.

"Atrus?"

He turned to find Marrim watching him.

"This was my grandfather's room," he said quietly, indicating the desk, the walls of books. "And *his* father's before him."

She nodded, then: "We've found the Book Room."

"Ah…" He steeled himself against bad news. "And?"

"There's a Book."

"Just one?"

Marrim nodded.

Atrus was silent a moment. His grandfather, Aitrus, had been the owner of two Ages. One, Ko'ah, had been handed down over eight generations, and was the family retreat. The other, Gemedet, named after the complex three-dimensional game played by the D'ni, had been written by him and the ahrotahntee, or "outworlder," who in time had become his grandmother, Anna.

The Book Room was downstairs. The door of the room was smashed, the shelves on the walls ransacked long ago. The faint yellow-brown residue that was everywhere in D'ni, and that he had always assumed was natural to the place, here lay thick upon everything.

On a podium in the center of the room a Book lay open, the faint ghost of a palm print over the dulled descriptive panel. He went across and stood, his hands gripping the edge of the podium as he stared down at the page.

Ko'ah. This was the Book of Ko'ah.

Of course. He remembered now. His grandfather, Aitrus, had taken the other Book with him when he'd returned here after the fall of D'ni, so that Veovis could not get to Anna and the child.

Atrus looked up, feeling giddy. The long years seemed to wash over him, as if, in that instant, he *was* his grandfather.

"Are you all right?" Marrim asked, concerned for him.

"Yes."

But that wasn’t entirely true. For a moment he had glimpsed his grandmother, Anna, in her final illness, Catherine by her bedside, the old lady’s pale, flecked hands caged within Catherine’s younger, stronger fingers, and recalled what she had told him then about those final days. And as he recalled that moment he felt a strong, almost violent urge to *see* Ko’ah, to link to it and see with his own eyes where his father, Gehn, was born; where Anna had nursed him through that first, almost fatal illness.

He raised his hand over the page, shadowing the ghostly imprint.

“Master Atrus?”

Atrus looked up, startled from his reverie. If he had moved his hand the tiniest bit it would have brushed the surface of the page. Reaching across, he closed the Book, then turned, looking at Marrim. “You’d best look after this.”

Atrus stepped back as Marrim came across and, taking the long-handled cutters from her belt, snipped the chain that connected the Book to the podium. He watched her carefully lift the Book and slip it into her knapsack with that same reverence he had seen her exhibit with all the Books.

Marrim turned to face him again, smiling, ever enthusiastic, her pale, oval face framed by the vivid blackness of her long, thick braided hair. “Where now?”

“Let’s leave here,” he answered her, looking about him one last time. “Let’s go and find the others.”

§

Irras paused in the shadowed hallway, frowning. Something was different. And then he understood. The colors. The colors here were brighter, more vivid.

He realized with a start what it meant.

Reaching out, he touched he wall, then drew his fingers back, sniffing at them. Clean. The wall was clean.

Irras spun around, holding his lamp out. “Gavas! Meer! Come quickly! I think we’ve found something!”

They rushed up, then looked about them, puzzled.

“What?” Meer asked. “What have you found?”

“Look about you,” Irras answered, amused now. “What do you notice that’s different?”

It was Gavas who saw it first. “The walls…the floor…they’re *clean!*”

Irras nodded. “And if they’re clean, what does *that* mean?”

“That someone’s…cleaned it?” Meer offered. And then his mouth fell open.

“Exactly!” Irras said, beaming now. “Someone’s been here before us. Someone must have come here and *cleaned* the walls and floors.” He half-turned, lifting the lamp high once more. Everywhere they looked it was clean.

“Go back,” he said, gesturing to Gavas. “Find Master Atrus and bring him here at once. He’ll want to see this for himself!”

§

That night Atrus called a special meeting. When all were gathered, he came out into their midst, the Book they had found in the great house in Jaren—the Book of Bilaris, as it was called—under his arm. He looked about him and smiled.

“So?” Catherine asked, preempting him. “Are we going to visit this Age?”

Atrus smiled. “Yes. But not yet. First I need to study the Book more carefully.”

“But what about the signs?” Catherine said. “The cleanliness of the house, the book of commentaries we found…there are D’ni in that Age.”

“That may be so,” Atrus conceded, “but for the sake of three or four days, I’d rather be certain all is well. Remember, caution is *everything*. For the lack of caution, D’ni fell. We must not make the same mistake. In all likelihood, the people on this Age—on Bilaris—are survivors from the fall. And from the cleanliness of the house, it would seem that they share our aspirations; they, too, would like to see D’ni rebuilt to its former glory. But…just as D’ni fell, so might many of these Ages have fallen. We do not know. Seventy years is a long time, even for a D’ni. Much can change in that time.”

He paused, looking about him again. “Then so it shall be. I shall prepare a Linking Book. Four days from now, we will link through. Myself, Marrim, Irras, and Meer. Catherine will stay here with Carrad, in case anything goes wrong.”

“And in the meantime, Master Atrus?” Carrad asked.

“The work goes on,” Atrus answered him. “There are Books to be found, boats to be repaired, quarters to be built.”

“And food to be eaten,” Carrad said, reminding Atrus that they had not yet had supper.

Atrus laughed, for the first time that day relaxing. “Trust young Carrad to think of his stomach at such a time!”

Carrad feigned a hurt expression, but like all there, he knew they had taken a huge step forward, and as Atrus looked about the circle, he saw how each face mirrored that same realization.

Survivors! Cautious as he was, Atrus, too, believed they would find them in Bilaris. There were D’ni in the Ages. They had only to be patient now and they would find them!

§

That night Catherine and Atrus decided to return to Chroma’Agana. Catherine had been back several times, but for Atrus it would be the first time since they had set up camp in D’ni, six weeks before.

Rowing across the dark and silent lake, he watched the city slowly recede, its details blurring into the great wall of rock, and felt himself relax.

K’veer was silent, empty. Lighting a lamp, they made their way up the great twist of ancient steps and into his father’s study where the Linking Book awaited them. There, Atrus hesitated.

“What?” Catherine asked, amused. She knew that look.

In answer he went across to the shelves beside the desk and took down his father’s notebook, slipping it into his knapsack, which already held the Book of Bilaris, the book of commentary, two blank Linking Books, a pot of special D’ni ink, and a pen.

“You need to rest…” Catherine began.

“And I *shall* rest,” he said, tightening the cord, then throwing the bag over his shoulder again. “But I also have to work. We’re close now, Catherine.”

“I know. But you must ease off. You’ll be ill.”

Atrus laughed. “For a moment you sounded just like Anna…”

He fell silent, realizing just how true that was. Why, if he closed his eyes, he could see in memory the two of them standing together under the trees on Myst island, more like mother and daughter than two strangers from separate worlds.

Long ago that memory, for Anna had been dead for nearly thirty years.

Shadows, he thought, surprised by how fresh her loss still seemed. How strange that the past could cast such deep shadows on the future.

Shaking off the mood, he stepped across and, with a smiling glance at Catherine, placed his palm upon the open page.

§

Atrus lit the fire, then straightened. Through the open door of the cabin he could see the moonlit lawn, edged by tall Oreadoran oaks, and, through the trees, the sea like a sheet of shimmering, beaten metal, stretching away into infinity.

It was a beautiful night. The kind of night that made Atrus feel young again; as young as when he’d first met Catherine. So it was whenever he returned here after a long absence.

Catherine was in the library at the far end of the island. She had gone there almost as soon as they’d arrived, the Book of Bilaris under her arm, while Atrus, who had given his solemn word that he would rest, had sat upon the shore, barefoot, staring out into the distance as the sun went down and the tide slowly ebbed.

He stepped outside, into the freshness of the night, then turned to look along the rocky spine of the island, his vision traveling along the narrow path toward the long, low shape of the library and the workshops and laboratories beyond, the connected buildings climbing the gentle slope of the hillside like steps, the textured stone a silvered gray beneath the moon.

He was tempted to call out to Catherine and ask her to come and walk with him, but he knew that she did not like to be disturbed when she was working. In that she was like him. Even so, he began to walk in that direction, hoping that perhaps she would look up and see him and, setting aside her work, come out and join him under the open sky.

Looking about him he realized just how much he loved this place. Its peacefulness spoke to the depths of him. Its sounds were like the sounds of his own body. Here he felt complete.

Yes, and it was strange how he needed to go away before he realized that. It was like Catherine. All those months of separation had, he knew now, been necessary. To teach him her worth.

Atrus looked up at the night sky, wondering, not for the first time, just *when* he was. From his studies of the star charts in the observatory, he had worked out that he was in a very different part of the galaxy from the planet he knew as Earth—or its equivalent—if one even existed in this Age. But it was more difficult to tell just how far he was from it in time, for when one linked there were no limits. The mind-staggering vastnesses of Time and Space were irrelevant. *Congruity*—the matching of word and place—was all that mattered.

Or, as his grandfather, Aitrus, had explained it to his grandmother, Anna: “These Ages are worlds that do exist, or have existed, or shall. Providing the description fits, there is no limitation of time and space. The link is made regardless.”

Atrus stopped, a smile lighting his features as he remembered how young Marrim’s face had filled with wonder when he had first explained it to her. And still, when he thought of it—when he really thought about it—he would feel that same wonder fill him. It was an astonishing ability to possess. Little wonder that his father, freed from the restraints of D’ni society and lacking the true humility of his D’ni peers, had thought himself some kind of god. It was clear now why Anna had taught him as she had—avoiding the same mistake she had made with Gehn.

Careful not to make the same mistake, his first lesson to his own students—to Marrim and Irras and Carrad and all their fellows—was this: One did not *make* the Ages to which the words linked. A far greater force than the D’ni had made those, yet it was easy to be deluded into thinking so, for the universe was so vast, so all-encompassing, so infinite in its

variety of worlds, that almost anything one wrote had its counterpart in reality.

Unstables worlds. Worlds that were living hells. Or the beautiful, “impossible” worlds that Catherine once wrote.

Moving past the Eye Pool, Atrus swiftly climbed the grassy slope until he stopped, not ten yards from the door to the library. The door was open, and from where he stood in the darkness, he could see Catherine, seated behind the great oak desk, the Book open before her, one finger tracing the lines of D’ni symbols as she read.

Atrus smiled and walked on, taking the path that led round to the right, past the side of the library and out onto the cliff path. Ahead of him the great Anchor Rock was a shadow against the greater darkness of the sky. Beyond it lay a thousand miles of emptiness.

He walked out onto the pale stone, the sea fifty feet below him, the great muscular shape of the Anchor Rock above him and to his left. Standing there, he thought of his father and of the notebook they had found in the study on K’veer. It had told him little that he did not already know or suspect, yet, reading Gehn’s words at this distance from events, he had, against all expectation, been impressed by his father’s intellect, and had found himself wondering what Gehn might have become had D’ni *not* fallen. And that thought had spawned others. Was it *really* Gehn’s fault that he had become what he’d become? The destruction of his hopes at such an impressionable age had clearly traumatized the boy, yet could everything be accounted for by that? What of the cruelty in his father, that *twisted* aspect of Gehn? Was that a product of events, or was it something natural in the child that, through circumstance, had been encouraged rather than controlled?

It was impossible to say. All he knew was that he himself had been lucky. Lucky to have had Anna during those formative years of his upbringing—to have been taught by so good and wise a teacher.

And then there were his own sons…

He pushed the thought aside, then turned, hearing soft footsteps just behind him.

‘Catherine?”

“Let’s go,” she said. “Tonight.”

“Tonight?” He laughed, then turned slightly, looking at her. “But I haven’t written the Linking Book yet.”

Her face, silvered in the moonlight, was smiling strangely. “No. But I have.” And she handed him the slender book, enjoying his surprise.

§

They linked to a large island, three-quarters covered in forest. There was a clearing beside the cave and a path led down between the trees, but otherwise there was no immediate sign of habitation.

It was mid-morning by the look of the sun in the sky, and it was warm with the suggestion that, as day drew on, it might grow hot.

They quickly searched the cave, looking for a Linking Book, but found nothing.

Now they went down, following the footworn path. Leaf shadow kept them cool as they went, but even so, by the time they reached the clifftop they were beaded with perspiration. A perfect, white sand beach lay thirty feet below them.

“It’s beautiful,” Catherine said, looking out across the scattering of islands that lay like emeralds upon the azure of the bay. “But where are they?”

There were no buildings. No boats or jetties. Nothing but the path to suggest anyone had ever been here.

A bird called from high up in the trees. Atrus turned and looked up at it, putting a hand up to shield his lenses from the sunlight that glittered on their surfaces.

“Let’s try the other end.”

They walked back, taking their time, relaxing in the sunlight. Passing the clearing once more, they went on, leaving the path, winding their way between the great, straight boles of the trees until they stood on a shelf of bare rock, overlooking a vast expanse of ocean.

“This can’t be right.”

“Why not?” she asked, turning to look back through the trees. “It conforms with the Book.”

“I didn’t mean that. I mean, where are they? They have to be here somewhere. It makes no sense unless they are.”

“Then let’s search the island.”

But a long and thorough search of the island found nothing. The island was uninhabited. Even the path, now that they looked properly at it, was partly overgrown.

"Maybe it's the wrong Book," Catherine suggested, sitting down wearily on a rock overlooking the island-scattered bay. It was hot now and she fanned herself slowly as she looked up at Atrus.

"It's possible," he answered, stepping up onto the ledge above her, "but then what about the book of commentary?"

"A false trail? To make us think they were here?"

"But why?"

"Because they were afraid. And because they wanted to safefuard where they really are?"

"I suppose it's possible." But Atrus's eyes stared out at the perfect, unspoiled shapes of the islands as if to decipher some mystery. He wiped the back of his hand across his brow, then turned to her again.

"Let's get back," he said. "There's nothing for us here."

§

It was said that the Great King was haunted by dreams, and that those dreams were filled with strange, inexplicable visions that the Great King then wrote down in a large notebook bound in bright golden leather. Or so Atrus's father, Gehn, had written. But Marrim knew better than to trust what Gehn had written. She had heeded Atrus's warning to her when Catherine had lent her the notebooks. *"My father had the tendency to twist facts to suit his vision of the world."* Even so, she could picture it vividly: the old man waking, his brow beaded with sweat, his hands trembling as he reached out to write down what he had seen in the darkness of his dreams.

Even if it wasn't true. Even if, like much that was in Gehn's notebooks, it had been exaggerated down the years, there must still have been a core of truth; some story, some actual event, that had spawned all of the subsequent tales about the Great King, like the speck of grit in an oyster shell about which the pearl subsequently grows.

Marrim closed the book and looked up. Lamps blazed about the camp. Just across from her, Irras and Carrad sat facing each other, Irras's

dark head pressed close to Carrad's polished skull, the two of them deep in conversation, while a number of other helpers looked on, listening attentively. She knew exactly what they were talking about, for there was really only one topic of conversation at the moment. The visit. The upcoming trip to Bilaris.

She smiled. Like all of them, she was excited by the prospect of venturing into another Age. D'ni was astonishing, certainly, but partly because it was also a gateway to so many other worlds, so many other ways of living. She glanced across at the great stock of Books that were piled up in Atrus's makeshift library and felt her head swim at the thought of what they were.

She had been blind to the reality of the universe surrounding her. She had thought her tiny world—that world of lodge house and fishing boats, of hill and stream and island—the sum total of existence. But now she knew. Whatever it was possible to imagine *could* exist.

In theory, anyway.

Marrim stood, then walked across, remembering her conversations with Catherine; recollecting what Catherine had said about the Books *she* had written. They must have been something to see.

As she came closer to the circle, Irras looked up and smiled at her, indicating that she should take a seat beside him, but she did not feel like sitting down. She felt restless. Eager to get on.

Resting her hand briefly on his shoulder, she walked on, leaving the young men to their talk. At the harbor's edge she paused, staring out across the darkness of the lake.

At first she wasn't sure. Then, with a huge grin of delight, she turned to the others.

"They're coming!"

Irras hurried across and stood beside her, squinting out into the darkness, until he, too, made out the dark shape of the boat. Moment by moment that shape grew larger, clearer. Catherine turned in the prow and, seeing them, hailed them across the water.

Marrim answered, her voice echoing back from the great levels of stone that climbed the cavern walls behind her.

She knew almost at once that something was wrong. She could see it in Atrus's face. Catherine was as cheerful as ever, but Atrus was withdrawn.

As he climbed up onto the quayside, Atrus beckoned Irras, then, without waiting for him, turned and walked over to the makeshift library, disappearing inside.

Irras was with Atrus barely two minutes. When he emerged, he was frowning, as if he'd been told something he didn't want to hear. He brushed past Marrim as if she wasn't there. She turned, meaning to follow him, but Atrus called out to her.

"Marrim! A word…"

She went inside.

"Here," he said, glancing up and holding out a folded piece of paper. "You'll need provisions for a week."

Marrim unfolded the paper, then looked back at him. It was a map of one of the upper districts.

"There's still a lot to be done," Atrus said, "so we'd best get down to it. I want all the Books collected in."

She understood. They weren't going. The trip to Bilaris had been canceled.

"We must complete the search," Atrus said, opening his notebook and reaching for a pen. "Only then will we know the full extent of our task."

"We'll go tonight," she said.

He looked up at her. "It's all right. Marrim. Tomorrow will do."

Marrim nodded, then back away, but it was only when she was standing outside, the paper held loosely in one hand, that it really hit her.

We aren't going. After all that, we're not going!

There was a moment of disappointment, and then Marrim looked at the map again and her determination was reborn. They would find all of the Books there were to find. And among them there would be Books that worked—that linked to functional Ages. And in those Ages, surely, there would be survivors.

But first it was up to her to find the Books.

Marrim slipped the map into her pocket. Tomorrow? Forget "tomorrow." She would gather her team together and begin the search tonight.

PART TWO

A BURROWING WORM BLINKS IN THE SUNLIGHT.

AND PULLS HIS EYES DOWN OVER HIS EYES.

EARTH'S MOUTH STEAMS. DEEP VOICES GRUMBLE.

TIME DRAWS A JAGGED LINE UPON THE SAND

IN WHICH THE WOMAN WAITS.

--FROM THE KOROKH JIMAH

VV. 21660-64

The broad leather spines were old but well cared for, the blues and reds, the blacks and yellows and greens of the ancient Books embossed with D'ni symbols that were faded yet still readable. Row after row of them crowded the shelves of the storeroom, overspilling into a second great room: 78 Books in total—all that remained of the tens of thousands that had once graced the great houses and common libraries of D'ni.

Two large desks had been pushed together in one corner of the newly added room, on which were stacked a huge pile of Kortee-nea—blank Books—they had unearthed, to their astonishment, beneath the fallen stones of one of the common libraries.

Seated at one of those desks, his head down, patiently toiling into the night, Atrus was unaware of Catherine's approach until he felt her hands upon his shoulders.

"Haven't you finished yet, my love?"

"Two more lines," he said, indicating the Linking Book he had been working on, "and then I'm done."

To one side of him, beyond the ink stand and the glowing orange lamp, was a small pile of Linking Books—five in all—that he had prepared already.

It was four months since their trip to Bilaris and they had all worked hard. All of the Books were gathered in—yes, and cataloged and read. The six most likely had been selected by Atrus and Catherine, after a long and sometimes heated debate, and now they were almost—*almost*—ready to go.

A month back, belatedly fulfilling his promise to the elders of Averone, Atrus had sent his young helpers home, to teach the new generation, taking the time, in their absence, to make his final preparations.

Tomorrow they would return, and a new phase of the reconstruction—a painstaking search of the Ages—would begin.

"You have the draft letter?" Catherine asked, easing past him to sit on the edge of the desk.

Atrus reached across and, rifling among his papers, came up with a single sheet. He handed it across, then watched as Catherine quickly read it through.

She looked back at him. "That should do."

"You don't think it too formal, then?"

"No. It has the right tone, I'd say. Dignified without being self-important."

He laughed at that. The letter was an introduction of sorts, as well as being a statement of intent. And when his teams went into the Ages, they would each take copies of the letter, ready to present, if and when they made contact with survivors.

"I'll make some copies, then," he said, taking it back from her, "and seal them using my grandfather's ring."

Catherine stared at him a moment, then, changing the subject, said, "You've missed her, haven't you?"

Atrus hesitated, then nodded. They were talking, as ever, of Marrim. "It's strange, Catherine. Marrim was always so quick, so enthusiastic, but something's changed since we came here. She's grown."

"Hungry children grow when fed," Catherine said, covering his hand with her own. "You should begin teaching her. That copy of the *Rehevkor* we found…. You should give it to her, Atrus."

The *Rehevkor* was the ancient D'ni lexicon; the principal teaching tool for D'ni children. Atrus himself had learned the D'ni language from it.

“You think so? You think she’s ready?”

Catherine grinned. “She was ready months ago. But first things first. Finish the Linking Book, then come and get some sleep. Tomorrow will be a long day.”

§

Stepping through the open doorway, Marrim stared into the shadows of the schoolroom. Through the windows on the far side she could see the bay, the sun setting over the water. In an hour she would be gone. To Chroma’Agana, and thence to D’ni.

And then?

The thought of going—of visiting the Ages—thrilled her, yet at the same time she felt a deep regret that she had to leave here. Before now it had been easy, for there had been nothing for her here—except, of course, her family—but this last time things had changed. Now she had a reason to come back.

Marrim walked to the desk at the front of the room. It had all been crudely, hastily fashioned, to the orders of the elders, yet it had served its purpose well. A hundred or more children had crowded into this room by the end, eager to hear her and learn from her. And she, for her part, had been as eager to teach them.

It had been a wonderful four weeks, all told, yet now that it was over she found that she had missed Atrus and Catherine, missed them more than she cared to say. With them *she* was the pupil.

She grinned, remembering those smiling, eager faces crowded into the room in front of her, the sea of enthusiastic hands, the openmouthed wonder as she told them stories about the D’ni.

Maybe that had been wrong, for her brief from the elders was to teach them useful skills—reading and writing and the use of numbers—but it would have been lean fare indeed had she not seasoned it with tales.

She smoothed her hands over the surface of the desk, then, knowing she had come here for a purpose, crouched down and began to take her things from the drawers, slipping them into her knapsack.

Last of all she removed her journal from the bottom drawer, pausing a moment to open it and read the last few entries. She had noticed

how Atrus wrote everything down, keeping a daily record of events, but she had never thought to do the same until two months back, when, on a search of one of the midlevel houses, she had come upon an unused notebook. Since then, she had made the time each evening to set down her thoughts about the day's activities, to *reflect* on what she'd done. And now that she did, she understood the purpose of it. If she were a boat, making her way across life's water, then the journal was her compass. It let her steer her course. For how could she know where she was going without a reference to where she'd been.

Which made it only all the more curious that Atrus's father, Gehn, had not seen that. Reading his journals, she had found it strange how little Gehn had reflected on the world about him. Gehn's was not, as she understood it, a true intellectual curiosity, he was interested only in forcing the world to fit his first conception of it: a conception warped by his youthful experiences and the unbridled power of the art of writing.

Marrim closed the notebook and slipped it into the sack, then looked about her again. Even in the last few minutes the shadows in the room had deepened. In a moment the sun would sink below the horizon and it would be night. And she would be gone from here again.

She had already said her good-byes, her mother clutching her tearfully, he father taking her hands and squeezing them—as much emotion in that as in all her mother's embraces. Now Irras and Carrad awaited her at the clearing in the wood. But still she stood there, reluctant to leave while one shred of light remained.

At such moments there was no logic to events; one had to go with the feeling.

The sun's last light threw a bar of red across the open doorway to her right. Into that light now stepped a child. A young girl.

Marrim blinked, as if she had imagined it, but the child was still there, looking across at her, the dying light reflected in the moist pools of her eyes.

"Allem?"

Allem slowly came across. From close up Marrim could see she had been crying.

"You will come back, won't you, Marrim?"

Marrim knelt, embracing her. "Of course I will."

"You promise?"

“I promise. Now go. Your father will be angry if he knows you are here.”

The girl nodded but did not pull away. “I had to come. You’ve meant so much to us.”

Marrim sniffed. “And you…I enjoyed teaching you. You were good pupils. You made it easy for me.”

The girl looked up. “Can I come with you?”

“Come?” Marrim went to shake her head, but Allem spoke again.

“I don’t mean now. I mean later. When I’m grown up.”

Again Marrim made to shake her head, but then, relenting, she nodded. “Yes, Allem. When you’re older.”

§

Atrus and Catherine were in the library on Chroma’Agana to greet them, as first Irras, and then Carrad, and finally Marrim linked through.

“Well…” he said, stepping back. “All is prepared. When the teams link through we can begin.”

The other team members would arrive tonight, but Atrus had wanted his team leaders back earlier to brief them.

“Which Ages did you finally choose, Master Atrus?” Irras asked. He had helped Atrus catalog the Ages.

“Six in all,” Atrus answered. “I’ve chosen old worlds to begin with. Family Ages of some solidity.”

“Will we be using the Maintainers’ suit?” Carrad asked.

“Not this time,” Atrus said, yet he glanced at Catherine as he did so, as if this had been a topic of debate between them.

They linked through to K’veer. There Gavas awaited them with a boat. Marrim greeted him, then took her seat in the stern, staring past the overhang of rock into the cavern beyond.

As they rowed out under the ledge and onto the lake, Marrim glanced at Atrus and, seeing him watching her, looked away, smiling to herself. It was so good to see him again. So good to be back. She had enjoyed her spell teaching, but this was her real work. *This* was where she belonged.

That morning’s briefings were long and highly detailed. Atrus was leaving nothing to chance. He had prepared information for each of the team leaders, giving them details of the terrain, the names of the families who had owned the Ages, and, as a precaution, basic points of D’ni etiquette. Last of all he handed them copies of the letter of introduction he had penned. Marrim stared at hers a moment, studying the dark green seal that had the imprint of a D’ni letter at its center, then slipped it into her jacket pocket.

The afternoon was spent in preparation, making up backpacks for each team member, with all-weather clothes and sufficient food. It had been decided that they would camp out in the Ages, if necessary, with one team member remaining at the link point, ready to get a message back to D’ni at a moment’s notice.

“I don’t expect trouble,” Atrus said, explaining the decision, “but we had best prepare for it.”

Even so, he would not let them take any weapons into the Ages. Their intentions were peaceful, and should the worst come to the worst and they were taken prisoner and searched, he did not want their captors finding anything upon them that might suggest otherwise.

“The Ages themselves are harmless. The Maintainers were careful to ensure that. And the survivors, if there are any, will undoubtedly be D’ni. They may not welcome you at first, but they will certainly not harm you.”

§

They slept that night in D’ni. In the morning they rose early, while the lake was still dark, and gathered in the space before the makeshift library.

A month previously, Atrus had had them carry down six of the big stone pedestals from one of the common libraries. These were now spaced out along the harbor front. A lamp had been set up above each, to illuminate the tilted lecterns on which lay the open Books, their descriptive panels glowing softly.

At a word from Atrus, the six teams of four lined up before their respective pedestals.

Atrus looked down the line of tense, nervous faces. Then, without a further word, he placed his hand against the panel and linked.

In less than a minute it was done. They stepped up, one by one, to the lecterns and disappeared, like ghosts vanishing into the air, leaving the harbor front empty, even as the lake began to glow with the faint light of morning.

§

Marrim stood at the center of the deserted village and looked about her, her vision darkened. It was six hours now and they had found no sign of life. The plague, it seemed, had taken them all.

The first sign of it had been in the cave. There, in a heap upon the floor beside the Linking Book, they had found two skeletons, their bones intertwined, their cloaks, rotted by damp, tearing like spiders' webs beneath her touch.

Veovis, she thought, and in her mind she saw Veovis and A'Gaeris, masked, their own hands gloved to protect them from contagion, placing the palms of the dead men onto the Book.

It was horrifying, yet it had been as nothing beside the other sights she'd witnessed. She had gone inside one hut only to find a whole family —mother, father, and their two young children—wiped out, their bones stretched out on the rotting mattress, their fleshless fingers linked in death.

That small, tender sign of affection in the midst of this horror had unhinged her momentarily. Until then she had been able to harden herself against it, to remind herself that this was what Atrus had warned them might await them. But *that*…

The disappointment seared her. She had not realized just how much of herself she had gambled on this venture.

"Lerral! Allef!" she called, stirring herself.

She watched the two young men step from the big meetinghouse at the far end of the central space, and saw at once the darkness in their eyes.

"Come," she said, walking over to them. "Let's go. There's nothing here for us."

§

Six worlds and not a single survivor.

Atrus had wanted to go back—to pack fresh provisions and have another, more thorough search of those two Ages where they had found nothing at all, not even bones—but Catherine had persuaded him against it.

“Never mind,” Atrus concluded, when all else had been said. “We’ll try again. We are certain to be more successful next time round. This time, I’ll just check one.”

“Yes. We need something to raise their spirits, Atrus. They’re feeling very despondent.”

“This one, I think.” Atrus showed her the cover. It was the Book of Aurack. “It looks as likely as any other. I’ll write our link back tonight. Tell Marrim and Carrad they can come with us. Oh, and Meer and Gavas, too. We’ll take six through this time. It’ll speed the search.”

Catherine leaned across, kissing him on his bearded cheek. “Good. The news will cheer them.”

§

“Is everyone ready?”

Atrus looked from face to face, his eyes questioning theirs. Then, satisfied with what he’d seen, he smiled and placed his hand against the glowing panel.

Aurack was hot. Stepping out from the linking cave, Marrim raised her hand to her brow instinctively, shielding her eyes against the sun’s fierce glare. Atrus was up ahead of her, standing on the edge of the escarpment, his special D’ni lenses pulled down over his eyes, their surfaces opaqued.

“Empty,” he said as Catherine stepped up beside him.

“It only *looks* empty,” she answered him. “Why, you could hide a hundred villages in that.”

He glanced at her, conscious of the others listening. “Do you think that’s what they’ve done?”

“It’s possible. After what happened to D’ni, it would make sense to take precautions.”

“Maybe,” he conceded, “but how are we going to find them?”

Marrim, coming up onto the ledge, saw at once what Atrus meant. What lay below them, covering the landscape from horizon to horizon, was no wood as she had experienced it on Averone, but a forest, a thousand square miles or more of densely packed trees; an ocean of green in which you could hide forever and never be found.

“Why don’t we light a fire?” she said.

Atrus looked at her. “If all else fails, we shall. But if they’re here, I suspect they’ll not have gone too far from the linking cave. They would want to know if anyone came through into their Age.”

“You mean to make a physical search of that?” Catherine asked, gesturing toward the great sprawl of the forest.

“Only part of it. Once we’ve made our search for the Linking Book, we’ll split up. Each take a small section of it.”

“What if someone gets lost?”

But Atrus had thought of that. He’d packed special dye-markers in every knapsack. They were to use these to mark the trees they passed.

“To prevent confusion, I’ve given each of you a different color.” He turned, looking at the three young men. “Carrad and Meer, you’ll take part in the first sweep. Gavas, you can be our anchor man here on the escarpment. If anything goes wrong, send up a fire flare.”

Gavas nodded, hiding his disappointment well.

“Good. Then we’ll concentrate our search on this side first. There’s a river down there—you can see it winking between the trees—so that might be a good site for an encampment. We can make our way down, then split up on the riverbank.”

Atrus looked about him. “First, however, let’s spread out and search this area. The Linking Book, if there is one, ought to be somewhere nearby.”

§

The river was a broad band of green, glimpsed between the straight dark boles of the trees off to the left. Out there, on the river's bank, it was swelteringly hot, swarms of exotic insects feasting on anything or anyone who strayed near, but here, beneath the branches of the trees, it was much cooler, the insect life less voracious.

Marrim paused to spray the bole of a tree, then turned, looking about her. The forest was alive with sounds, with the buzz of insects, the endless cries of birds, and the rustle of unseen creatures as they hastened away from her approach.

Even though it was much cooler here, it was still humid, and Marrim stopped frequently to mop her brow, her clothes sticking to her uncomfortably. It never got this hot on Averone, even during the dry season, and that, as much as the alien life-forms, was beginning to get to her. It was an hour since they had split up at the river, and she had seen nothing at all to indicate that there was any kind of intelligent life in this Age. But each time she thought that, she reminded herself of what it had looked like from the escarpment—how huge an area it was they were searching—and she felt herself spurred on again.

She had grown used to the way the ground beneath her gave with each step, a thousand years of leaf fall forming a thick, dry carpet of mold beneath her feet. She had even grown used to the strange quality of the light beneath the leaf canopy, its pellucid greenness that had at first made her think herself at the bottom of some great ocean.

Marrim scratched at her arm. The bites were heavily swollen and formed a small mountain range of red blotches from her exposed elbow to her wrist. She smiled now, but at the time she had thought they were going to eat her alive!

They had known that Aurack was a big, primitive world, but it was strange that Atrus hadn't mentioned the insects. Then again, his briefing hadn't mentioned a thing about the heat, either, so maybe they had come at an exceptional time—at the height of a hot season, perhaps, or in the midst of a heat wave. But somehow she wasn't convinced. Nothing here looked as if it didn't belong in this heat. This was quite clearly a tropical environment.

She moved on, marking her way as she went, then stopped, whirling about 180 degrees. There had been a cry: a high, inarticulate screech.

Hurrying, she began to make her way back the way she'd come, following the trail of marked trees.

Carrad and Catherine were waiting at the meeting point beside the river as she half ran, half walked toward them. Atrus arrived a moment later.

"Who was it?" he asked, looking from one to the other for an explanation.

"I thought it was you," Catherine said, puzzled now.

Atrus turned, looking back into the trees. "Where's Meer?"

They heard a crashing in the trees. Relieved, Carrad laughed. "Here he comes now!"

But the crashing stopped as suddenly as it had begun, and in the silence that followed, there was no sound of anyone making their way toward them.

"Let's go," Catherine said, touching Atrus's hand. "His is the blue trail. It should be fairly easy to follow."

They went in again, more cautiously now, Atrus leading them, Carrad at the back, his shaven head moving this way and that as he surveyed the jungle close at hand.

The trail snaked inward, then followed a dip in the land down into a hollow. There, abruptly, it ended, in the middle of a small clearing.

Insects buzzed and whined in the sultry heat.

Atrus went from tree to tree, then stopped, looking about him, perplexed.

Marrim bent down and picked something up. It was a piece of torn cloth. At first she didn't understand, then it hit her. She held it against her own cloak. The match was perfect.

"Atrus…"

She handed him the piece of cloth and watched as his eyes registered its significance.

"He may have snagged it against something," Atrus said, meeting her eyes. But that wasn't what he was thinking.

"Here!" Carrad said, from the far side of the clearing. "It looks like something was dragged through the bushes at this point."

They went across, the four of them standing there, staring silently at the broken branches.

Something had been dragged through the bushes.

Turning back, Marrim began to see things she had missed first time round. The way the ground seemed churned up on one side of the clearing. She walked over, then stooped, poking here and there with her fingers.

A wet stickiness greeted her. She raised her hand and gasped. Blood! Her fingers were covered in blood that had seeped down through the leaves.

Catherine, standing next to her, knelt down and took her hand, turning it and studying it.

"Meer?" Atrus called, cupping his hands and yelling into the thick undergrowth beyond the clearing. "*Meer?* Where are you?"

But there was no answer. Nothing but the flap of wings and the high, plaintive call of a hidden bird.

§

Armed, Atrus and Carrad had linked back to Aurack and returned to the clearing, working their way through the undergrowth, following the trail of broken branches until they had come out beside a waterfall. There, in the mud at the edge of the stream that ran away from the fall, were tracks.

The tracks of something large.

Wary, they followed the trail down the narrow valley until they came upon what they had feared they would find: fragments of Meer's torn and bloody clothes. Of Meer there was no sign, but the tracks led on, and there were clear indications that the beast had settled here to make his meal before moving on, dragging its prize with it.

Carrad, seeing the sight, had crouched and groaned, utterly distraught. But Atrus had merely stood and looked, his pale eyes carrying the full weight of his grief.

"Come," he said at last. "Let's go back."

Back in D'ni, Atrus got out the Book of Aurack once again and read it through. Finally, he closed it and, looking up, shook his head.

"I don't understand," he said. "It has the Guild of Maintainers stamp. There ought to be no creatures like that in Aurack."

"Then someone must have captured it elsewhere," Catherine said.

“But why go to all that trouble? Why not simply go straight to the world the creature comes from?”

“Perhaps because that was too dangerous,” Catherine answered. “I’ve been thinking about it, Atrus. These were D’ni, right? Scholars and Guildsmen, builders and stonemasons, inkmakers and archivists, not hunters. In which case, Aurack would be the beast they had released for their sport. Or beasts, if my guess is correct, for this creature cannot have survived seventy years without others of its kind to breed with. I guess they would release them and kill them within days. Then, when the Maintainers came to inspect the Age, there would be no sign of them.”

“Maybe,” Atrus conceded. “But whatever the truth is, one thing is certain: We must take greater precautions in the future. No one must venture alone in the Ages. And we must make the teams bigger. Only two teams, perhaps, of ten or twelve. Yes, and we must arm them.”

§

Atrus took charge of the next expedition. Twelve of them were to make the link, the first two armed. If there was any exploring to be done, they were to keep in teams of three, and each team leader carried a fire flare, to be used at the first sign of any trouble.

A long week had passed since Meer’s untimely death—a week in which Atrus and Catherine had returned to Averone to break the news to Meer’s parents—and now, as they stood before the podium, there was a very different mood—of sobriety rather than excitement—about the job at hand.

“All right,” Atrus said quietly. “It’s time.”

Carrad and Gavas went through first. A moment later Atrus followed them.

The linking cave was long and low, but sunlight from a crevice high up to one side made it seem less oppressive than it would otherwise have seemed. The air was fresh and there was a faint moistness to the air.

“Islands,” Marrim said, stepping through after Atrus. “I can smell islands.”

Atrus nodded. There were indeed islands, if the Book was accurate, but that wasn’t what Marrim had meant. She could smell the sea. And

other things. It was like Averone. That same mixture of scents.

They climbed up onto a shelf of rock. Below them the land fell away. A long slope of waist-high grass ending in the silver-blue line of a sunlit shore. And there—immediately visible from where they stood—a village, nestled about a small, natural harbor.

Seeing it, Atrus felt the heavy burden he had been carrying these past months lift from him. For the first time in weeks he smiled.

“Come,” he said, looking about him at their eager faces. “Let us go down and greet our cousins.”

§

Their laughter was short-lived. The village was deserted. Even so, there were signs that it had recently been occupied. Everything was well tended, the fences in good repair, the pathways swept.

Inside the cabins the beds were made and clothes lay pressed and folded in the wooden cupboards. The shelves were well stocked, the utensils clean and polished. Three fishing boats lay anchored in the harbor, their pots and nets neatly stowed. Everywhere one looked one could see the products of a small but industrious society. Yet of the people there was no sign.

“They must have seen us emerge from the cave,” Gavas offered. “Seen us and run away.”

“No,” Marrim said. “There wouldn’t have been time. Besides, where could they have got to?”

It was true. The village was at the end of a narrow promontory. The only way they could have left and not been seen by Atrus and his party was by sea.

Atrus walked over to the harbor’s edge and, shielding the top of his D’ni lenses with one hand, stared out to sea.

“We’ll wait,” he said, a strange confidence in his voice. “We’ll set up camp and wait.”

§

The boat approached slowly, long poles hauling the inelegant craft through the water until it was positioned just outside the harbor's mouth. The craft lay low in the water; a broad-keeled, capacious vessel with more than a dozen separate structures on its long, flat deck, so that it seemed more like a floating village than a normal boat. Those on board were clearly wary of the newcomers and there were heated discussions on board before one of them—an old man, solemn in appearance, D'ni lenses covering his pale eyes—stepped up to the prow and hailed them.

"Ho, there! Who are you and what do you want?"

Atrus raised an arm and hailed the graybeard. "My name is Atrus, son of Gehn, grandson of Aitrus and Ti'ana, late of D'ni, and these are my companions."

There were audible murmurs of astonishment from the craft. The elder, however, seemed unimpressed. "You say you are late of D'ni. Yet D'ni is fallen. As for your father, I have never heard of him. Yet the names of your grandsires are well known to me, if such is true."

"It is true. And we mean you no harm. We wish only to talk."

"So you say," the old man replied, then turned away.

For a long while there was no further word from the old man as he engaged in a long, murmured discussion with his fellows—a dozen or more of them crouched in a huddle at the center of the boat—then, finally, he came back across and hailed Atrus once again.

"It is decided. I will talk with you, Atrus, son of Gehn."

And with that he stood back, allowing two of the younger men to lower a small rowboat over the side of the vessel. He climbed into this and, with a gesture to those aboard, took up the oars and began to row for the shore. As he did so, the men aboard the larger vessel leaned heavily on their poles, beginning to move the craft out into the bay.

As the rowboat nudged against the harbor wall, Carrad hurried down to help the old man tie up, but he was waved away with a suspicious glare.

Carrad moved back, letting the elder pass him on the steps.

Atrus hesitated a second, then stepped forward, bowing respectfully to the stranger, who had stopped less than five paces from him. From close by he seemed not as old as he'd first appeared and Atrus

realized with a shock that he was wearing the cloak of a D'ni Guildsman. An old, much-mended cloak.

"So," the old man said, "you are Atrus, eh? My name is Tamon and I am Steward here. In D'ni I was a Guildsman. A stonemason. But that was long ago. Now tell me, Atrus, why are you here?"

"I am here to ask you to come back," Atrus answered, meeting Tamon's eyes unflinchingly, seeing how the other sought to find something there.

"Back?" Tamon asked.

"To D'ni."

Tamon's laugh was dark and full of sorrow. "To D'ni, eh? But D'ni is a ruin."

"Is," Atrus agreed. "Yet it need not be. If enough can be found, we might yet rebuild it."

"And that is your task, Atrus? To find enough to rebuild D'ni?"

Atrus nodded.

"Then speak, for it seems we have much to talk of." Tamon half-turned, looking back at his vessel, which had now edged far out into the bay, then turned back, meeting Atrus's eyes, his own filled with a cautious fear behind their D'ni lenses.

§

They talked for most of that afternoon. Tamon questioning Atrus closely. Afterward, Atrus stood on the jetty, watching old Tamon row away, his tiny boat disappearing into the late evening gloom. He expected to have his answer later that night, but two whole days were to pass before the Guildsman returned. During those two long nights, while Atrus and his party cooled their heels, distant lights—campfires—could be seen twinkling on a smudge of island far out in the center of the lake.

It was late morning on the third day when Tamon climbed the harbor steps wearily.

"So?" Atrus asked, concealing any impatience he felt.

"We have decided we will talk with you," Tamon answered. "Others will come at high sun. They will listen to what you have to say."

"You are still in doubt?"

“Not I,” Tamon said, “but you must understand, Atrus. We have been much alone here, and some of the younger men have never seen a stranger. But come…let us eat and talk and then, perhaps, decide what shall be done.”

§

Tamon had not known Atrus’s grandfather, yet he had much to tell Atrus about the circumstances leading up to the fall of D’ni, things not even Anna had told him.

“There were many who blamed her for everything. In those final hours they cursed her name, as if Veovis and that foul philosopher had had no part in it,” Tamon concluded, even as he offered his pipe across the table to Atrus.

Atrus accepted the stubby, ornately carved pipe, then, out of politeness, took a tiny indrawn breath of the acrid smoke. Tamon, watching him, smiled, showing a set of pearl white, perfectly formed teeth.

“Strong,” Atrus said, trying not to cough. His eyes watered.

Catherine, seated beside Atrus, accepted the pipe from him. Tamon watched her through half-lidded eyes. It was clear that he was not used to women who were quite so forward in their ways. As she handed the pipe back to him he frowned, not knowing he did so, then looked away quickly, lest what he was thinking conveyed itself to Catherine.

Yet Catherine, looking on, saw everything. These people had lived so openly these last seventy years that they had lost whatever social masks they’d once possessed. What they were was written clearly on each face: their hopes, their fears, yes, and especially their suspicions, all could be read, as in a book.

But of this she said nothing.

“And you, Master Tamon?” she asked. “Did you blame Ti’ana?”

“Not I,” the old man said, and Catherine could see he meant it. “Oh, I thought her strange, I don’t deny. But she was honest. Anyone with a pair of eyes could see just how honest she was.”

“Then come back with us, Master Tamon,” Atrus said, leaning toward him. “Help us rebuild D’ni. It will take time, I know. A long, long

time, perhaps. But time is what we D'ni have plenty of."

Tamon stared back at him, then shrugged. "I must talk some more with my own people. Discuss things with them further. Only then…"

"I understand," Atrus said. "Yet in your deliberations, remember this. There will be other survivors. Hopefully many. And they will make the task easier for us all. Every extra pair of hands will make a difference."

"I see that," Tamon said. Then, changing the subject, he turned and clapped his hands. At the signal, two young boys—barely out of their infancy—came across and, bowing, presented themselves to Atrus and Catherine.

"My grandchildren," Tamon said, smiling proudly at them. "Arren, Heejaf…say welcome to the good people."

The two boys bowed, and then, in perfect D'ni, bid their guests welcome and good health. Atrus grinned and clapped his hands loudly, but Catherine, watching the old man, seeing how proud he was at that moment, knew, even before he had discussed the matter with his fellow villagers, what the answer would be.

§

It was only later that they learned of the old man's tragedy.

Nine days after the fall of D'ni, his son, Huldref, had volunteered to link back, to try to discover what had happened and whether it was safe to return. He had promised he would be back within a day with news, but Huldref had never returned. Doubtless he had succumbed to the plague that had claimed so many other victims. And Tamon and his wife had been left to grieve.

That night, however, the mood of Tamon and his people was much brighter. News that D'ni was to be rebuilt had stirred the survivors and they were eager to get back and help. Packing what they would need, they prepared to link back to their home Age—an Age many of them, far younger than old Tamon, had never set eyes upon.

"We shall return to D'ni," Atrus said, taking Tamon's hands, "and prepare things for your people. There are makeshift shelters and beds. Enough for all of you."

“Then let us meet again tomorrow, Atrus, son of Gehn,” Tamon said, his old hands gripping Atrus’s tightly. “Tomorrow. In D’ni.”

But Atrus was to have one further surprise. As the disorientation of the link back to D’ni wore off and he looked about him at the harborside, he shook his head, trying to clear his vision. On the far side of the square, a whole village of tents had sprung up. And people! There were people everywhere Atrus looked, sitting on their packs outside the tents, or standing in groups, talking. Seeing him, they fell silent, looking to him expectantly.

“Gavas?” Atrus called, looking to his young helper, even as Catherine and Marrim linked through. “What is going on here?”

“Atrus?” a voice asked from behind him. “You are Atrus, I assume?”

Atrus turned to find himself facing two men, in their thirties; a small rather rotund man with disheveled hair, and a taller, dark-haired man with huge dark eyebrows and a frowning face. From their pale eyes he knew at once who they were.

The first of them—the one, he presumed, who had spoken—offered his hands.

“I am Oma,” he said, “from Bilaris. And this is my brother, Esel.”

§

“Well,” said Atrus, once they were all seated about the desks in the makeshift storehouse, “when did you get here?”

“Six hours back,” Esel answered. “Just before you last linked.”

Atrus narrowed his eyes. “You saw that?”

“We witnessed everything,” Oma said, getting in before his brother could speak again, one hand nervously combing through his lank, disheveled hair. “From the very start. We saw you…”

“We saw you, on K’veer,” Esel said. Unlike his brother, he sat very still, like a statue, his face formed into what seemed a permanent frown. Indeed, looking at the pair from where she sat at Atrus’s side, Catherine could not think of two men who looked less like brothers.

“You’ve been watching us all the time?” Atrus asked.

“Most of the time,” Oma conceded. “We weren’t sure.”

“So what made you change your mind and join us?” Atrus asked.

“Intuition,” Esel said.

Atrus waited, and after a moment Oma explained. “Things *felt* right. We watched what you were doing and there seemed no harm in it.”

“We talked a long while,” Esel added, “back in Bilaris, and we…”

“About that,” Atrus interrupted. “We visited your Age. There was nothing there.”

“So it seems,” Oma said, a faint smile on his lips. Again his fingers raked through his lank hair. “After D’ni fell our father thought we should take precautions. He decided that we should move from the main island. We built dwellings on the smaller islands…”

“On the far side of them,” Esel added, “where they couldn’t be seen from the main island.”

“So that’s it!” Atrus said, sitting back and steepling his hands, the mystery solved. “And your father…”

“Died twelve years ago,” Oma said, looking down.

“I’m sorry,” Atrus said.

“He was a Guildsman,” Esel said, after a moment. “A Master in the Guild of Archivists. He taught us.”

“And it was your idea to come back?” Catherine asked, speaking up for the first time.

Again the two men looked to each other.

“Our father never wanted us to,” Oma said. “Oh, he came back several times himself, but the mere sight of what had happened here would always darken his spirits. In the end he stopped coming.”

“But you came back,” Catherine prompted, “after his death.”

“Yes,” Esel answered. “Our people looked to us, you see. On Bilaris…well, there was no future on Bilaris.”

“And there’s a future here, you think?” Atrus asked.

“Yes,” the two men answered as one, then grinned—the same grin from two very different faces. And suddenly Catherine could see that they were indeed brothers.

“We want to help you,” Esel said.

“There are many craftsmen among us,” Oma added, “stonemasons and technicians.”

“That’s good,” Atrus said. “But how many of you are there?”

“The number will be no problem,” Esel said, sitting forward slightly. “We can live under canvas until more permanent quarters are available. And we can bring food from Bilaris. Fruit and fish. And fresh water.”

“Excellent,” Atrus said. He was about to say something more, but Catherine spoke again.

“Forgive me, Oma and Esel, but what exactly do you do?”

Oma looked to his brother. “We are…historians.”

“Of a kind,” Esel said quickly, a strange look of censure in his eyes.

“Of a *kind?*” Catherine asked, watching him closely.

“Of the self-taught variety,” Esel said, looking directly at her.

Again, there was that openness about him that she had seen in Tamon earlier. The loss of masks. As if, in being forced to live away from D’ni and its intense social pressures, they had all shed several layers of skin.

“Then you are among fellows,” Atrus said, “for we have all been forced back upon our own resources since D’ni fell. There is no shame in being self-taught, only in not seeking learning in the first place.”

“Well spoken,” Oma said, grinning once more. But beside him Esel just stared at Catherine, unaware that he was doing so.

§

When Tamon and his party finally arrived the next morning, they began to organize what part each would play in the coming reconstruction. It was generally agreed that the overall planning would be left in Atrus’s hands, but that Tamon, as a former member of the Guild of Stonemasons, was to be placed in charge of the actual stone-working.

There was a need, of course, to create sufficient living quarters for those returning from the Ages—for they had already outgrown their harborside site—but it was also felt that some kind of gesture was necessary: something that would symbolize the rebirth of D’ni. It was Tamon’s task to come up with a suitable scheme, something that would raise their spirits but not divert too much time and energy away from more practical measures.

By late afternoon he returned, his eyes twinkling. “The old Inkmakers Guild House,” he said, in answer to Atrus’s unspoken query. “I’ve just come back from it, and it seems relatively undamaged. Nothing structural, anyway. There are a few cracks, of course, and a few of the internal walls have come down, but otherwise it appears sound.”

“Then that’s where we begin,” Atrus said, looking about him at the gathered helpers, who numbered more than a hundred now. “But the search must go on. Until all the D’ni are home.”

There was a great murmur of agreement from all sides. Smiling, Atrus turned back to Tamon. But Tamon had turned and was staring up once more at the massive pile of ruined stone that climbed and climbed into the darkness of the cavern’s roof, and as Atrus looked, he saw the old man’s eyes fill with uncertainty and knew he would have to be a pillar of strength in the days to come.

To see them through. To make sure they do not turn back.

“You must tell me what tools you’ll need, Master Tamon,” Atrus said, speaking as if he had seen nothing. “And men. What will you need? A dozen?”

Tamon turned back, switching his attention back to the practicalities once again. “Oh, not as many as that. Eight should do it. After all, we must not neglect our other duties.”

“No,” Atrus agreed, holding Tamon’s eyes a moment, letting his own certainty register on the old man. “One step at a time, eh?” he said, and, stepping close, touched the old man’s shoulder briefly. “One step at a time.”

PART THREE

INNER AND OUTER MEET IN A FACE ON A PAGE.

DEEP LINES AND ANCIENT EYES. MIRRORED.

THE DOOR IS OPEN. THE STRANGER COMES.

BLACK FLIED THE CLOUD BEHIND THE NEWCOMER.

--EXTRACT FROM GEHN'S NOTEBOOK.

ATTRIBUTED TO GERAD' GENA (UNDATED)

Marrim raised the visor of the protective helmet and looked across to where Atrus looked on, his own face similarly shielded.

"Well?" she asked. "Is it okay?"

Atrus stepped forward and crouched, examining the slab of stone.

The room they were in was small and enclosed—its thick stone roof distinguishing it from every other building on the harbor front—and it was hot. Very hot. The fierce orange glow from the corner forge colored everything in the room, seeming to bleed into the air and melt the edges of objects. Beneath the thick leather clothing she wore, Marrim felt extremely uncomfortable. Her neck and back were slick with sweat, but she did not complain. After all, she had volunteered for this job.

"It looks good," Atrus answered, straightening up. "A nice straight cut. We can chip out the rest."

She smiled. If Atrus said it was good, it was good. He didn't mince words when it came to such matters. Either a thing was done properly or it wasn't worth doing—that was his philosophy.

Marrim went across and pushed the forge door closed, then reached up, taking one of the medium-sized hammers from the rack on the wall. She would chip it out right now, herself, before Master Tamon returned.

"Hold," Atrus said. "Not too eager now."

"But…"

"There's no rush," Atrus went on. "It will not harm if you wait until Master Tamon comes back. Besides, he'll want to check this for himself."

That much was true. Old Tamon did not let a thing pass without checking it. And sometimes—just sometimes—that could be wearing on the nerves. But Marrim did not argue. She put the hammer back, then, crossing to the door, slid back the bolt and stepped outside, into the cooler air.

She pulled off her helmet, then turned. Atrus was watching her from the doorway.

“What did your father say?”

“My father?”

“About your hair.”

Five weeks back, before she had returned to Averone, she had cut her hair short. Not conscious she was doing so, Marrim reached up, her fingers brushing the fringes of her dark hair where it lay against her neck. “He…didn’t say.”

“No?” There was a tone of surprise in Atrus’s voice, but he did not pursue the matter.

Marrim glanced at him, then looked away. “I practiced, you know. Cutting stone, I mean. I took a hammer and some chisels with me when I went back…and a mask.”

“And gloves, I hope.”

She smiled. “And gloves. I’d sit on the rocks, on the far side of the island, and chip away. I’d carve shapes in the stone.”

Atrus was watching her earnestly now. “You wanted it that much, eh?”

Marrim met his eyes. “To be a stonemason? Yes. It seemed of the essence of what you D’ni are. You live in the rock. You know it better than anything else.”

“Even writing?”

She nodded. “Even that. I mean, the writing’s wonderful—astonishing, even—yet it seems almost secondary to what the D’ni really are. Or were. When I watch Master Tamon at work, I seem to glimpse something of how it must have been.”

“Yes,” he said, clearly pleased by her understanding. “It took me a long time to take in. Yet the two processes have much in common, Marrim. Both require long and patient planning. Before one makes a single cut, or writes a single word, one must know why. One must have clearly in mind not just that single part, but the whole, the *totality* of what one is setting out to achieve.”

“What your grandmother called the bigger picture?”

Atrus laughed. “Who told you that? Catherine?”

Marrim nodded, smiling now.

“And how goes the writing?”

“Slowly,” Marrim answered, her face clouding a little. “I’m afraid I’m not very patient.”

“Nonetheless, keep at it. Like all things, patience will come.”

Seeing the dismay in her face, Atrus smiled. “You think patience an innate quality, Marrim. Well, perhaps for some it is. But for most of us it must be learned. It is a life skill that must be acquired if one is to succeed.”

“You think so?”

“Oh, I know so. Look about you now. What do you see?”

Marrim turned and looked. The square beside the harbor, which, when they’d first arrived, had seemed so vast and spacious, was filled with makeshift dwellings, forming a kind of village beneath the steep-sloping levels of the city, while to one side, surrounding the library where Atrus worked, was a collection of workshops and storehouses.

Six months had passed since they had encountered the first survivors and much had changed for the better. It helped also that there were more than twelve hundred of them now, yet Marrim did not expect that number to increase by much. In a week—maybe less—the last of the Ages would have been searched, and they would know finally just how many had survived.

Not enough, Marrim thought, dismayed despite the signs of industry that surrounded her. She did not know how many Atrus had expected, but she was sure it must have been more.

Looking up, beyond the busy harbor front, she saw at once the scale of their problem. Compared to the ruin that surrounded them, their little hive of activity was as nothing. So many empty streets, so many fallen and abandoned houses.

Patience…No wonder Atrus counseled patience.

Yet maybe he was right. Maybe patience could be learned. Maybe the task was not beyond them.

“Well?” Atrus prompted, when a minute had passed and she still had not answered him. “What *do* you see?”

“Stone,” she answered him, meeting his eyes. “Stone, and rock, and dust.”

§

That evening they held a meeting in the library. Catherine was there with Atrus, as were Master Tamon, Oma, Esel, Carrad, and Irras. Marrim was the last to arrive.

Coming straight to the point, Atrus drew a big leather-bound Book toward him and opened it.

The descriptive panel glowed.

“Twelve Books remain,” Atrus began. “This, the Book of Sedona, is probably the least dangerous of them. Even so, when we explore this we shall need to use the Maintainers’ suits.”

Atrus paused, then. “Sedona is a very old Age. Thousands of years old. Maybe even older. The language used is of a more antiquated and formal kind than we are used to. Oma and Esel have given up a great deal of their valuable time to help me…*translate* the Book. We think we know what most of it means, and what kind of Age we’re likely to encounter, but we cannot be sure, so we shall wear the suits as a precaution.”

“And the other eleven?” Tamon asked.

“The Guild of Maintainer seals on those are either broken or missing, and it is difficult to ascertain just whether those Ages were in use at the time D’ni fell. The only way to be certain is to make rigorous checks.”

“Using the suits,” Tamon concluded.

“Exactly,” Atrus said. “But first Sedona. The suit is ready. We shall link in the morning. You know the routine. We’ve practiced it often enough these past months. Tomorrow we do it for real. Marrim, Carrad, Irras. You will report here at sixth bell, along with Oma and Esel. I shall be here to greet you.”

“Are you going to come, too?” Marrim asked. Surprised.

“If it’s safe,” Atrus said. “I was there at the beginning. I think it only right I should be there at the end.”

§

The cell was a great square of a room, a dozen paces to a side, the jet-black walls coated with a layer of impervious matter—part stone, part chemicals—that sealed it hermetically. A narrow doorway, set deep into the end wall, was the only exit from the cell, and that led directly to an air

lock, beyond which was a second sealed room, almost identical to the first —a fail-safe devised after one particularly gruesome accident.

The rooms differed in two respects alone. The first was that this cell—known simply as the Link Room—was further divided by a double wall of floor-to-ceiling bars that formed a tiny cell within a cell; thick rods of special D'ni rock known as nara spaced a hand's width apart, the two walls separated by less than an arm's length. In the center of that double wall, flush with it, was set a small revolving cage, the only entrance to that smaller cell.

The floor of the inner cell was a mere two paces square and lined with nara. A big semicircular machine of stone and brass was suspended some ten feet up, capping it like a roof, coiled armatures and other strange devices extending from its dark interior. This was the decontamination pod.

The second difference was the alcoves—eight in all, four to the left, four to the right—that were recessed into the walls on either side of the doorway. These were deep and heavily shadowed, and housed the eight protective suits that stood like huge mechanical sentries, their shiny surfaces untarnished by age.

So it was. So the Guild of Maintainers had designed it four thousand years earlier, founding their design upon long centuries of experience and many a fatal mission.

In theory, nothing could go wrong. No matter what was brought back from the Ages, it could not escape these cells. The bars prevented anything dangerous, whether it be desperate natives or aggressive beast, from breaking into D'ni, while the seals and air lock dealt with the ever-present threat of contagion.

For seventy years the cell had lain in total darkness, but now it was bathed in light from the great overhead lamps; a clean, almost sanitized light. In that penetrating glare Atrus and his fellows toiled, dressed in special lightweight suits, the impervious cloth a rich dark green, the bright red lozenge of the Guild of Maintainers crest, with its symbol of an unblinking eye above an open book, prominent on every chest. These suits were very different from those in the alcoves, one of which they were now removing from its recess, four of them hauling the incredibly heavy suit along the grooved runners in the floor.

Finished, they stood back, admiring it.

The protective suit had a brutal, almost mechanical appearance. It stood at the center of the laboratory, empty, like the casing to some giant insect, its chest and arms studded with strange appendages. The jet-black overlapping plates of which it was made had a polished, metallic look, yet there was no element of metal in their manufacture. The suit was made of stone—of a special lightweight stone named deretheni, not as hard as the legendary nara, but tough enough to handle the job for which it was intended.

Special hydraulics—slender rods of the same molecularly altered stone—gave the suit a degree of flexibility, but not enough for its wearer to turn quickly or to run. Not that that mattered. The wearer would need neither to turn nor run, only to look out through the polarized visor and take in, in the instant he was there, what the Age looked like.

Right now Gavas was putting on the inner suit, Oma helping him to attach the various straps and buckles, the two of them talking quietly, running through the routine for the dozenth time that morning.

The suit was ancient—according to the records it had been made by the Guild of Maintainers more than a thousand years ago—yet it looked brand new. Like everything the D'ni made, the environmental verification suit had been built to last.

Everything was ready. Or almost so. It remained only for Atrus to attach the last of the sampling devices, put the Linking Book inside the glove, and set the timer.

Once that was done, Gavas could climb into the suit and be sealed in.

Atrus consulted with Catherine a moment, then turned and looked across.

"Are you ready, Gavas?"

Gavas smiled. "As ready as I'll ever be."

"Good."

Atrus reached down and picked up the two special books—tiny, "stone-bound" volumes less than a sixth the size of a normal Linking Book—then slid them into the special compartment in each glove.

The first would link Gavas to Sedona, the second would link him back. Both worked on the same principle. A thin, inert membrane overlay each page, rendering it impossible for Gavas to link—until he pressed a stud on the back of the right-hand glove, which would release a vial of

harmless gas that would, in turn, dissolve the membrane and bring his palm into contact with the page.

At that moment he would link. And at that selfsame moment the timer would be activated.

For the first two seconds on the other side a similar membrane would overlay the page of the Linking Book in his left-hand glove, preventing him from linking back. But then the timer would do its work, the tiny vial of gas would be released, and Gavas's palm would press against the page once more.

After two seconds, Gavas would link back, whether he was conscious or not. Alive or dead.

Two seconds. It was all they could risk first time out. Yet it was time enough for them to find out all they needed to know about the world on the other side of the page. The suit's sampling devices would tell them what the atmosphere was like, how hot it was, and whether there were any signs of life. And unless it was so bright that the visor completely blacked over—which it was designed to do, to save Gavas's eyes from frying in their sockets—he ought to get a good glimpse of the Age.

The deretheni plates of the suit would insulate him against the fiercest heat, while the suit's hermetic seals would ensure that no noxious substances leaked through to poison him.

Carrad and Oma helped Gavas climb into the outer suit, then began to seal him up, each of the catches snapping shut with a resounding clunk. As they went across to fetch the massive helmet, Gavas gave one final look about him, smiling nervously. They had drilled for this many times now, but this was the first time any of them had done it for real.

Only Atrus seemed unaffected by the tension of the moment, and as he came across to give Gavas his final instructions, his very calmness put them all at ease.

"Remember, Gavas, your job is to look. Don't think, just *see*. I'll do the thinking for you when you get back."

It was not the first time Atrus had said this, but Gavas nodded as if it were.

Atrus stood back, letting Carrad and Oma lift the helmet, with its heat-resisting visor, up over Gavas's head, fastening it into the brace about his neck. Satisfied, they tightened the six great screwlike bolts that held it in place. That done, they began to work their way down the suit, from neck

to toe, checking each one of the special pressure seals. Satisfied, they stepped back.

The gloves were last. Now they only had to move him over to the cage. He could have walked there, but it was quicker for them to push him along the grooved track and close the barred door behind him.

There was a great hiss of hydraulics and then the tiny cage turned a full 180 degrees. It clunked into place, bolts emerging from the floor to secure it. Only then did the barred door open once again, allowing Gavas to step out slowly, awkwardly, into the inner cell.

Wearing the suit, Gavas had little room to maneuver. Slowly, very slowly, he turned, until he was facing Atrus again.

All was ready. There was no reason for any further delay. Atrus looked to Gavas and placed his left hand over the back of his right, miming the signal. Gavas nodded, then—the motion of his arm exaggerated by the suit—copied the motion.

The suit seemed to shimmer in the air, then it was gone.

Inside the cell there was a nervous exchange of looks. Only Atrus stared straight ahead at the now empty cage.

One beat, two beats, and it was back.

The heat exploded into the room, as if someone had opened a furnace door. With a fierce crackling the whole suit seemed to convulse as it dropped the temperature gradient, the air about it steaming as the automatic extinguisher flooded the chamber with an enormous hiss.

There was a great groan from every side. Immediately, Carrad and Irras rushed to the chamber, wishing to help as the heavy layer of retardant boiled on the surface of the suit. They moved to step through the cage to help him, but Atrus called them back.

“No!”

They stood there, horrified, watching, knowing there was nothing they could do but wait while, slowly, the stone hardened as it cooled—the wet foam smothering the darkening surfaces. But now it was warped and twisted. The limbs stretched like wax, the body of the suit partly crumpled into itself, the helmet misshapen.

Catherine moved to speak when the silence had become unbearable, but stopped short when a faint groan came from within the suit.

Carrad quickly opened the floor drains purging the chamber. Irras flung wide the chamber door and selflessly went about extricating Gavas. Minutes passed as the others anxiously waited—their rehearsed duties and ready supplies would prove to be enough to spare his life, this time.

They carried Gavas away, his wounds being carefully tended prior to returning him to Averone for recovery.

“A nova,” Atrus answered quietly. It had to be. Nothing else could have generated the temperatures or pressures capable of melting a suit.

Gavas had stepped straight into the heart of an exploding sun.

§

Aridanu was next. A newer age, but lacking a Guild of Maintainers stamp. They had found the Book, partly damaged, in one of the upper district houses. It seemed okay, but that lack of a stamp worried Atrus.

As Carrad and Irras helped Esel climb into the E.V. suit, the door at the far end of the lab hissed open and Marrim hurried in.

“I’m sorry I’m late, Master Atrus,” she said, clearly relieved to see that Esel had not yet linked.

Atrus looked up from where he was working and nodded.

Marrim hastened across, moving between Carrad and Oma to slip something over Esel’s neck.

“What is it?” Esel asked quietly. He had already inserted his arms into the suit’s voluminous sleeves and so could not reach the delicate pendant.

“It’s a charm,” Marrim said. “For luck.”

Esel glanced across at Atrus, but Atrus was busy, making a final check of the apparatus they would use to analyze the samples.

“Thanks,” Esel said quietly, clearly touched by her gesture.

Marrim stood back then watched as Carrad and Irras went about their work. Satisfied, they moved back, letting Atrus take over.

“Are you all right in there, Esel?”

There was a muffled response, barely audible. The right-hand glove flexed and unflexed—the signal that all was well.

“Good,” Atrus said. He turned, looking to the others, who at once began to move the bulky suit toward the cage.

As Esel stepped out, then turned to face them, the cell fell silent. There was a tension in the room that had not been there before.

All was ready. Once again, Atrus looked to Esel and placed his left hand over the back of his right, miming the signal. Esel nodded, then nervously copied the movement.

The suit shimmered in the air, then it was gone.

One beat, two beats, and it was back.

No flames, no smoke…

Thank the Maker, Marrim thought, seeing Esel's head move through the clear glass of the visor.

At once they swarmed about him, gloved hands reaching through the bars to pluck things from him, divesting the suit of its various sampling devices, even as, overhead, the great machine slowly descended, a fine mist of spray beginning to rain down over the suit, cleansing it.

Only Atrus spoke, questioning Esel about what he'd seen.

"What's it like?"

"Beautiful!" The word was clear despite the muffling effect of the helmet. But what he said next was less easy to make out.

"What's that?" Atrus said, straining to hear.

"People," Esel answered, that single word again quite clear. His eyes shone, a broad grin split his face. "There are *people* there!"

§

They linked through an hour later, after the analysis of the samples had confirmed what Esel had seen.

Aridanu was a lush and beautiful Age; a world of huge trees and peaceful lakes. They linked into a clearing overlooking one of those lakes, an ancient wood and stone village nestled into the fold of hills just below them. Smoke rose from a dozen chimneys. As Atrus and his party walked down, men stepped from the cabins to greet them, openhanded and smiling.

When several dozen had gathered, children milling about their feet, they made their introductions. Their spokesman, a man named Gadren, took Atrus's hands firmly, a broad smile on his face. "We knew

you would come back. When we saw the suit…" He laughed. "Why, it half frightened the children to death!"

"I'm sorry," Atrus began, but Gadren waved his apology away. "No, no…We knew at once what it was, and you were right to take precautions. This is an old world."

"And beautiful," Atrus said.

"Yes…" Gadren looked about him thoughtfully, then. "You come from D'ni, I take it?"

"We do."

"And how *are* things there?"

"We are rebuilding."

"And are there other…*survivors?*"

"More than a thousand."

Gadren's face lit at the sound of that. "A thousand." Then, more seriously. "And you want us to return, yes? To help you rebuild?"

"You are welcome. Yet the choice is yours."

"And has anyone said no?"

Atrus hesitated. No one had actually said no. But in three instances there had been a promise to "come later"—promises that had not yet been kept.

"You must do as you see fit," he answered finally. "If you are happy here…"

"Oh, we are happy, Atrus. Never happier. Yet happiness is not everything, is it? There is also duty, and responsibility. I love this place, true enough, but I was a Guildsman once, and I swore oaths to stand by D'ni to the end. When D'ni fell I felt the obligation had lapsed, but if it is to be rebuilt…"

"You need time to discuss this among you?" Atrus asked, looking about him at the villagers, noting how few of them were older than himself.

Gadren smiled. "There is no need for that. The matter was settled long ago. If D'ni calls, we will answer." He gripped Atrus's hands again. "We shall give what help we can."

§

Later, when they were all sitting in Gadren's cabin talking, someone mentioned the old man who lived alone on an island on the lake.

"An old man?" Atrus asked, interested.

"His name is Tergahn," Gadren's wife, Ferras, said before her husband could speak, "and he keeps bitterness for a wife."

"He lives a hermit's life," Gadren said, frowning at his wife.

"Hermit indeed," Ferras said, making a face back at her husband. "If we see the old stick once a year that's oftener than most."

"Is he D'ni?"

"Oh, indeed," Gadren said. "A fine old gentleman he must have been. A Master, I'd guess, though of what Guild I wouldn't know."

"You didn't know him, then?"

"Not at all. You see, he was passing our house when it all happened. The great cavern was filling up with that evil gas and there was no time for him to get back to his own district. My father, rest his soul, saw him and asked him in. He linked here with us."

"And afterward? Did he not try to return?"

Gadron looked down. "We did not let him. He wanted to, but my father would let no one use the Linking Book. Not for a year. Then he went himself. After that, no one went."

"And the Linking Book?"

"My father destroyed it."

Atrus thought a moment, then stood. "I would like to meet this Tergahn and talk with him. Try to persuade him to come with us."

"You can try," Ferras said, ignoring her husband's frown, "but I doubt you'll get a word out of him. He'll scuttle away like a squirrel and hide in the woods behind his cabin till you're gone."

"He's that unsociable?"

"Oh, aye," Gadren said with a laugh. "But if you're keen to meet with him, I'll row you there myself, Atrus. And on the way you can tell me what's been happening in D'ni."

§

Their destination was at the far end of the lake, over a mile from the village. The lake curved sharply here, ending in a massive wall of dark granite. The island lay beneath that daunting barrier, its wooded slopes reflected in the dark mirror of the lake.

As they rowed toward it, that mirror shimmered and distorted.

A narrow stone jetty reached out into the lake. From there a path led up among the trees. Tergahn's cabin was near the top of the island, enclosed by the darkness of the wood. It was silent on those slopes. Silent and dark.

Standing just below the cabin, staring up into its shadowed porch, Gadren cupped his hands to his mouth and hailed the old man.

"Tergahn? Tergahn! You have a visitor."

"I know."

The words startled them. They turned to find the old man behind them, less than ten paces away.

Tergahn was not simply old, he looked ancient. His face was deeply lined, his eyes sunken in their orbits. Not a shred of hair was on his head, the pate of which was mottled with age, yet he held himself upright and there was something about his bearing, a sharpness in his eyes behind the lenses, that suggested he was still some distance from senility.

Atrus took a breath, then offered his hands. "Master Tergahn, I am honored to meet you. My name is Atrus."

The old man stared at him a while, then shook his head. "No, no… you're far too young."

"Atrus," he repeated, "of the Guild of Writers, son of Gehn, grandson of Master Aitrus."

The old man's eyes blinked at that last name. "And Ti'ana?"

"Ti'ana was my grandmother."

Tergahn fell silent. He looked down at the ground for a long time, as if lost in his thoughts, then, finally, he looked up again. "Ahh," he said. "Ahh."

"Are you all right, Master Tergahn?" Gadren asked, concerned for him, but Tergahn gave an impatient gesture with his hand.

"Leave me," he said, a hint of bad temper in his voice. "I need to talk to the boy."

Atrus looked about, then realized that Tergahn meant him.

“Well?” Tergahn said, staring pointedly at Gadren. “Haven’t you a boat to look after?” Then, turning, pulling his cloak tighter about him, he stomped past Atrus and up the slope.

“Come,” he said, stepping up into the shadows of the porch. “Come, Atrus, son of Gehn. We need to talk.”

§

The interior of the cabin was small and dark, a bulging knapsack sat beside the open door, its drawstring tied.

At the center of the room was a table with a single chair. Standing on the far side of that table, Tergahn put his arm out, indicating that Atrus should be seated.

There were shelves of books on the walls, and prints. Things that must have been there before Tergahn came.

Declining the offer of the chair, Atrus stood there, facing Tergahn across the table.

“Forgive me, Master Tergahn, but I sensed just now, when I mentioned my grandfather’s name, that you knew him.”

“I knew *of* him. He was a good man and an excellent Guildsman.” Tergahn stared at Atrus intently a moment. “Indeed, you’re very like him now that I come to look.”

Atrus took a long breath. “We came here…”

“To ask us to return?” Tergahn nodded. “Yes, yes, I understand all that. And I’m ready.”

“Ready?” For once Atrus could not keep the surprise from his voice. “But surely you’ll want time to pack?”

“I have already packed,” Tergahn answered, indicating the bag beside the door. “When I heard the boat coming and saw you on it, I knew.”

“You *knew?*”

“Oh, yes. I’ve been waiting a long time now. Seventy years in this cursed place. But I knew you would come eventually. Or someone like you.”

“And all this?” Atrus, gesturing toward the books, the various objects scattered on shelves about the room.

“Forget them,” Tergahn answered. “They were never mine. Now come, Atrus. I will not wait another hour in this place.”

§

The final searches took much longer than the earlier ones. As Atrus had foreseen, the majority of them proved to be dangerous, unstable Ages, and the E.V. suit found much further use. But there were successes. One Book in particular—an old, rather decrepit volume for which Atrus had held very little hope—yielded up a colony of three hundred men, women, and children. This and a second, much smaller, group—from a Book that had been partly damaged in the Fall—swelled the population of New D’ni to just over eighteen hundred souls. On the evening of that final search, eight weeks after they had linked into Sedona, Atrus threw a feast to celebrate.

That evening was one of the high points of their venture, and there was much talk of—and many toasts to—the rebirth of D’ni. Yet in the more sober atmosphere of the next morning, all there realized the scale of the task confronting them.

When a great empire falls, it is not easy trying to lift the lifeless carcass back onto its feet. Even if many more had survived, it would have been difficult; as it was, there were not enough of them to fill a single district, let alone a great city such as D’ni. At final count there were 618 adult males, and of them a mere 17 had been Guildsmen.

Atrus, making his final reckoning before beginning the next phase of the reconstruction, knew that one thing and one thing only could carry them through: hard work.

Each night he fell into his bed, exhausted. Day after day he felt this way, like a machine that cannot rest unless it is switched off completely. Each night he would sleep the sleep of the dead, and each morning he would rise to take on his burden once again. And little by little things got done.

But never enough. Never a tenth of what he wanted to achieve.

One morning Atrus wandered out to see how Master Tamon was faring. Tamon had cleared most of the fallen masonry from the site, exposing the interior of the ancient Guild House, and now he was about to

begin the most delicate phase of the operation: lifting an internal wall that had come down in what had been the dining hall. The fallen wall has smashed through the mosaic floor in several places, revealing the hypocaust beneath it. Master Tamon's problem was how to clear away the massive chunks of fallen wall without the damaged floor collapsing beneath his team as they worked.

After much consideration, he had decided that this was a simple mining problem—an exercise in shoring up and chipping out—and therefore he had called in "Young Jenniran," a sprightly ninety-year-old who had been a cadet in the Guild of miners when D'ni fell. When Atrus arrived, the two men were standing, their heads together, on one side of the site, a sheet of hand-drawn diagrams held between them as they debated the matter.

"Ah, Atrus!" Tamon exclaimed. "Perhaps you can help us resolve something."

"Is there another problem?"

"Not so much a problem," Jenniran said, "as a small difference of opinion."

"Go on," said Atrus patiently.

"Well…Master Tamon wishes to lift the wall and save the floor. And I can see why. It's a very beautiful piece of mosaic. But to do so, we would have to get beneath the floor and prop it up, and that will take days, possibly weeks, of hard work and involve considerable risks for those undertaking the task."

Atrus nodded. "And your alternative?"

Jenniran glanced at Tamon, then went on. "I say let's give up the floor. Let's drop weights on it and smash the whole thing through, then clear up the mess. It will not save up precious days but cut out any risk of injury."

"But the floor, Atrus! Look at it!"

Atrus looked. He could see only the edges, and they were covered in a fine layer of dust, but he had seen the diagrams of the Guild House and remembered the mosaic well. It would be a great shame to lose it. Then again, Jenniran had a point about the safety element, and the floor *was* badly damaged as it was.

And then there was so much else to do. So much to clear away. So much to repair and make good. Thinking that, Atrus made his decision.

“Can I have a word, Master Tamon?” he said, laying an arm about the older man’s shoulders and turning him away.

§

The floor gave with a huge creaking sigh. There was a deafening crash that echoed all about the cavern.

Dust rose in a great choking cloud.

Studying the scene through his visor, Atrus felt a moment’s regret. As the dust began to clear, there was a murmur of surprise from the watching helpers. Something was wrong. The hole was much *deeper* than they had imagined it would be…and longer. Atrus blinked, then raised his visor, staring into what appeared to be some kind of hall beneath the old Guild House, two rows of massive pillars flanking it.

He turned, looking to Tamon.

“Master Tamon…is there anything in the plans?”

Tamon looked mystified. “Nothing. At least, nothing like *that*.”

“The hypocaust…”

But Atrus could see that the ancient heating system that ran beneath the ancient Guild House had collapsed and whatever it was lay *beneath* that.

“Well,” he said, after a moment’s reflection. “I guess we’d best bring lamps and investigate.”

“Go *down* there?” Master Tamon asked.

“Certainly,” Atrus said, intrigued by what he could glimpse within that shadow. “Those pillars seem strong enough.”

“We should check them first.”

“Of course…” Atrus looked about him, calling to this one to bring this, that one to do that—organizing them; being the hub about which they all revolved. Yet even as he orchestrated it all, in his mind he was already down there, poking among the shadows, trying to piece together the mystery.

§

“Marrim! Marrim! Come quickly! They’ve found something beneath the Guild House!”

Marrim had turned at the first hearing of her name. Now she set aside the book she had been reading and stood.

“Beneath it?”

“Yes,” Irras said, coming up to her, breathless from running, “We…broke through the floor of the old dining hall and there was a chamber underneath it.”

“Well?” he said, after a moment. “Aren’t you going to come and see?”

“I’ve work to do,” she said, and it was true. She was teaching some of the younger children basic D’ni, and she had to prepare the work for tomorrow’s lessons, but this *was* important.

“Okay,” she said. “Just to look. Then I must get back here.”

“Come one then!” And with that, Irras took her hand and half dragged her across the square and beneath the arch, heading for the Guild House.

By the time they got there, a number of ladders had already been lowered into the hole and lamps set up along one side. Atrus, Tamon, and Jenniran stood in a huddle some ten feet away from the overhang, Jenniran holding up a lamp as they stared into the chamber, where several of Tamon’s helpers were checking the pillars for any signs of cracking.

Seeing what was beyond them, Marrim felt a ripple of excitement. It was magnificent, like the entrance hall to a great palace. The walls and pillars appeared to be of beautifully colored marble, and, farther in, the floor looked like a polished mirror.

She was still staring when Esel and Oma hurried up. There was a moment’s stunned silence as they took in the sight, then Oma spoke.

“It *has* to be.”

“Why?” Esel asked.

“Because what else *could* it be?”

“But they’re only stories. You said so yourself.”

“Maybe. But even myths are based on something. And maybe *that’s* the something.”

“What’s that?” Atrus called from below.

“It was in one of my grandfather’s books of D’ni legends,” Oma said, walking over to the edge and addressing Atrus. “There were several mentions of a Great King and of his temple, and of a hall of beautifully colored marble.”

“And you think this might be it?”

“They were only tales,” Esel said apologetically. But Oma shook his head.

“That is exactly how it is described. The two rows of massive pillars. And at the end of the hall there’s a great doorway, surrounded by a circle of stars.”

“So the book says,” Esel quickly added.

Atrus nodded thoughtfully. “All right. Come down, all of you. Let’s see if Oma is right or not.”

§

Atrus led the way, under the lip of rock and into the great chamber, his lamp held high, the fire-marble burning with a fierce white light that seemed to emphasize the purity of the colors in the stone.

The rows of pillars on either side of the hall went on endlessly, it seemed, each pillar so huge that to Marrim, walking between them, it seemed as though they walked in the halls of ancient giants. Deep, deep into the rock it went. And then, suddenly, there it was, the far end of the chamber, and there—just where Oma had said it would be—was a huge doorway, set within a great circle of stone, a dozen broad steps leading up to it.

They approached, stopping at the foot of the steps, looking up at that massive doorway.

“Stars…” Atrus said.

“Then this is it,” Tamon, who stood beside him, agreed. “The Temple of the Great King.”

“Maybe he’s inside,” Oma said excitedly. “Maybe this is his tomb. If so…”

Atrus looked to him. “Was there anything else in the tales that we should know about, Oma?”

Oma hesitated, then shook his head. “Nothing that I remember. Only those mentions of the prophecies.”

“Yes,” Marrim said, “but they were in Gehn’s notebook. In view of how much else he wrote was suspect, we can’t be sure that they were all true.”

“I agree,” Atrus said. Then, turning to Irras, he added, “Go up and examine it.”

Irras climbed the steps. For a time he was silent, examing the edges of the great door meticulously, then he looked back at Atrus.

“It looks as though there *was* a real door here, at some stage, but it’s been sealed up. And a very efficient job, too, by the look of it.”

Atrus looked to Tamon. “We could *sound* it. If there *is* a chamber behind that, then it will show up on a sounding scan.”

Tamon nodded, suddenly enthusiastic. “There were machines in the Miners’ Guild House. If they’re still there, we could use those.”

Atrus smiled. “Excellent. Then arrange it, Master Tamon. Meanwhile, we’ll set up lamps in here. And Oma…”

“Yes, Atrus?”

“Bring me the book you spoke of. Your grandfather’s book. I would like to read those passages myself.”

§

Atrus looked up from the page and frowned. Nothing was clear. Everything was hearsay and rumor. Of dates and names and facts there was nothing. Even so, those two lines where the chamber was described had a powerful effect. They seemed to give some credence to the rest, for if *they* were true…

He felt the soft touch of familiar hands on his shoulders.

“Atrus?”

“Yes, my love?”

“Aren’t you coming?”

“In a moment…” He hesitated, then half turned, looking up at her. “Those passages in my father’s notebook…wasn’t there a mention of a great library?”

“There was. But not in connection with the Great King.”

§

It had taken eight of them to haul the capsule up the makeshift tracks and position it on the platform, alongside the door. Now Master Tamon sat at the controls of the large crystalline craft while Jenniran read from the Guild manual.

“Forgive me, Master Tamon,” someone said, pushing through the crowd of watchers at the foot of the steps, “but might I have a word?”

Tamon turned, about to make some bad-tempered comment, when he saw who it was.

“Why, Master Tergahn, I…” Then, “Of course. Come on up. If you know *anything* that might help…”

The old man slowly made his way up the steps until he stood at the rear of the sounding capsule. He looked about him, then nodded to himself. Tamon stood, indicating that Tergahn should take his place. The old man did so, once more looking about him, familiarizing himself with the controls. He gently felt each knob, each switch, recalling their function. Reaching out, he grasped the headphones and pulled them on.

“You know how to operate that, Master Tergahn?” Atrus asked, stepping up.

“We’ll see,” the old man answered without turning; laying one hand gently, respectfully on the long metal shaft of the sounder.

Tergahn closed his eyes, then gently eased the shaft down and to the left, pressing on the pearled handle as he did. At once a single, pure note grew in the air. Yet even as it formed its perfect shape, the tone clear and clean, Tergahn twitched the end of the shaft. At once the note died.

And returned, *changed* from the rock.

Tergahn’s eyes slowly opened. He looked to Tamon, then, nudging the shaft a little to the right, closed his eyes again and gently pushed down on the shaft.

A second note grew, slightly stronger and higher than the first. And once again, even as it formed, Tergahn killed it.

Again there was an echo from the rock. Different this time. Much lower than the sound that had come back the time before.

Atrus watched, closing his eyes each time a note sounded; trying to make out some discernible difference in what came back. And indeed, there did seem to be some kind of pattern to what he was hearing.

Twenty, thirty times Tergahn sent a signal into the rock. Then, finally, he sat back, nodding to himself.

"I'll need to make more soundings…a lot more…but…" Tergahn swiveled round on the seat. "There is definitely a hollow behind that wall. A void of some kind. But how big it is is much harder to tell. My ear was never trained to make distinctions of that kind."

Atrus nodded. "We should discuss things and hear all sides before we choose to act. If it's sealed, there might be a good reason *why*."

"Wise words," Tergahn said. "If the D'ni chose to seal that chamber and erase all mention of it from their history, then perhaps they had a reason for doing so."

"I agree," Atrus said. "We should discover if anything more is known of the Great King and of the events surrounding the sealing of his Temple. Maybe one or another of our company heard some tale at their mother's knee that might add to the sum of our knowledge, scant as it is. Until then, we should do nothing rash.

"I shall call a meeting," Atrus went on. "Tonight. In the meantime, Master Tergahn, if you would continue with your soundings?"

Tergahn nodded, no flicker of emotion in his deeply lined face. "I shall be guessing at best."

"Then guess your best guess. And if there is anything else you need, give instructions to young Irras here. He can be your legs."

Tergahn nodded tersely, then turned back, returning to his task.

Atrus watched him a moment, then turned away. "Come," he said to Catherine, as he began to make his way down the steps. "We have a meeting to arrange."

§

"So," Atrus began, addressing the small group gathered in his room that evening after the meeting, "it all comes down to hearsay."

"And what is written in your father's notebook," Catherine added.

“Yes,” Atrus said. “And that is little enough.” He paused, then: “Even so, I think we might take a look and see what’s on the other side. But caution must be our byword. Once Master Tergahn has completed his soundings, we shall make a sample drilling and push a scope through and see what’s to be seen.”

“And then?” Carrad asked.

Atrus smiled. “And then, if all is well, we shall breach the seal and go inside.”

§

Back at the doorway, Master Tergahn had finished his soundings. As Atrus returned, he was sitting on the bottom step, papers scattered about him, hunched forward over a chart, writing.

Atrus stopped several paces from him. “Master Tergahn?”

The old man looked up, then gestured for Atrus to join him. “See,” he said, indicating the diagram he had been working on. “It seems to go back quite some way, but it’s not very wide. No wider, it would seem, than the circle itself.”

Atrus studied the diagram a moment, then looked up at the circle of stone that surrounded the doorway. “A tunnel, you think?”

“It might be.”

Atrus turned. “Irras…help Master Tamon bring a drill from the Guild House. One of the small-bore machines with a sealed end. The kind we can take an air sample from. And a scope. It’s time we saw what’s behind there.”

It took them more than an hour to set up the drill, the heavy frame in which it rested placed low down and at the center of the door. Then, with Master Tamon supervising and Atrus looking on, they began, the drill bit, encased as it was within the transparent sealing sheath, nudging the stone surface, then biting deep, the whine of the drill filling that brightly lit space beneath the old Guild Hall.

Slowly, slowly, it ate into the toughened rock. Then, with a marked change of tone—a downward whine—it was through.

Tamon signaled for the power to be cut, then stepped across to examine their handiwork. He hunched over it a moment, then turned to

Atrus and nodded.

Slowly and very carefully they removed the bit, an airtight seal inside the sheath clicking shut behind it. As it did, Catherine, wearing special gloves, removed the bit and hurried down the steps to where a temporary laboratory had been set up. Immediately, Carrad and three others came across and lifted away the heavy frame that held the drill, carrying it down to the foot of the steps.

They waited twenty minutes while Catherine analyzed the air sample from the tiny capsule in the bit. Satisfied, she nodded to Atrus. “Just air. Stale air.”

“Okay,” Atrus said, turning to Irras, who stood nearby, the scope—a long, curiously “furred” shaft with a lens at each end and a small bullet-shaped extrusion at its tip—held against his chest, “let’s see what we have here.”

Irras stepped across and very carefully inserted the rod into the end of the sheath, the special seal within the sheath opening before the scope’s tip, the continuous circles of fine hairs on the scope’s surface, which gave it its “furred” look, maintaining an airtight seal even as the rod slid into position.

As the end of the scope clicked into place—a finger’s length of the shaft protruding from the surface of the sheath—Irras turned to Atrus. “Atrus? Will you be first to look?”

Atrus nodded, then came across and, crouching, put his eye to the lens. There was a small catch on the side of the shaft where it protruded. Atrus now placed his thumb against it and drew it back.

There was a muffled pop and the surface of the lens, which had been dark until that moment, now glistened with light; light that was reflected in the pupil of Atrus’s eye.

The muscles about Atrus’s eye puckered. He drew back the tiniest fraction. And then he nodded.

“It’s not a tunnel, it’s another hallway. Smaller. Narrower, too, with pillars set into the sidewalls.”

“Can you see the far end?” Catherine asked, stepping up alongside him.

“Just,” he said. “It’s almost in shadow. There might be steps there—it’s hard to make out…”

“And a doorway? Is there another doorway?”

Atrus shrugged, then moved back, straightening up again. “I don’t know. As I said, I couldn’t make it out. Here, Marrim…your eyes are better than mine, you look!”

Marrim hurried across, then crouched, her eye pressed to the lens. For a time she was still and silent, then she moved back.

“I think so,” she said. Then, “But there has to be, surely? I mean… why build all this if there’s nothing on the other side?”

Oma was about to comment, but Atrus quickly interceded. “Let us waste no more breath speculating. Master Tamon, bring up the cutting equipment. Let’s breach the seal. I want to see what’s at the far end of that chamber.”

§

After a long day’s work the huge cutting frame was maneuvered into position before the doorway, four massive bolts securing it to the walls on either side. Then, taking the utmost care, the seal was breached, six of the D’ni using handheld cutters, the ancient door prised from the stone in which it had been set. Then, and only then, was it removed, the stone sighing as it gave, a huge gust of stale air wafting out into that space beneath the rock.

The massive slab of stone was lifted on four huge pulleys and lowered—the thick hawsers straining at the weight—onto the floor of the hall. Then, and only then, when it was safely down, did Atrus turn and contemplate the inner chamber.

The fire-marble they had fired into the chamber still glowed, but shadows gathered at the edges of vision. The far end of the chamber was dark, the doorway—if door it was—hidden from view.

A dozen or more pillars ranged along each side of that narrow chamber, set back into the walls, their marbled surfaces covered with strange markings. Stepping out between them, Atrus raised the lamp, then walked over to one of the pillars. He stood there a moment, staring up at it, then turned.

“Oma…come here.”

Oma hastened across.

“What do you make of these?”

Oma stood there a while, studying the carvings. They looked like the signs and symbols of some ancient language.

"I…don't know."

"Esel?"

Esel shook his head. "I've never seen their like."

"No," Catherine agreed, "and yet they look familiar."

"Familiar?" Atrus turned to her. "You think you've seen these somewhere before?"

"Yes…but I can't think where."

Atrus turned back, then, stepping across, reached up and put his fingers into the groove of one of the more complex characters. The cuts were deep and smooth, each edge and surface finely polished. As for the symbol itself, it had the definite, finished shape of a letter in an alphabet yet at the same time it also suggested a picture.

Atrus stepped back, lifting the lantern, trying to see if there were any other markings farther up the pillar, but what the lamp revealed was not more markings but Books, thousands upon thousands of Books, on shelves recessed into the walls high up and back from the pillars.

No wonder they hadn't seen them at first.

Oma gave a cry of pure delight, while Esel turned, looking to Carrad, his long, frowning face filled with a sudden urgency. "Carrad… Irras…bring ladders. Quickly now!"

They were back within a minute, Irras scrambling up onto the ledge, then hurrying down again, one of the ancient, leather-bound Books clutched to his chest.

As Oma carefully opened the page, they gathered round.

"Look!" Esel said. "It's the same script as on the pillars."

"It looks very much like it," Oma agreed. "And the panel…"

"Do not touch it," Atrus said quietly. "There is no Guild of Maintainers seal. And who knows how old these Ages are, or if they are stable or otherwise."

Atrus stared at the page, unable to decipher that ancient script, yet there was something about it that was familiar. Looking up, he raised his lantern once again, astonished by the sight. If they were all like this…

He walked on, slowly, the lamp held up before him, the darkness receding before him. Wall after wall of Books met his gaze, until he felt

quite overwhelmed by it all. Then, lowering his eyes, he turned away…and stopped dead.

Just ahead of him, through a low arch flanked by pillars, was an anteroom. He stepped through, into a small chamber with four tiny alcoves leading off. The floor was marble, the low ceiling a concave circle of mosaic. His lamp blazed in that tiny space, and as he looked about him, Atrus realized that in each alcove the character that had appeared on the very first pillar was repeated.

And at the very center of the door, the character that had appeared on the very first pillar was repeated.

Atrus stared a moment, then turned, looking back toward where he others were still huddled about the ancient Book.

“Irras! Bring Master Tergahn! Now! Tell him we have need of his services once more!”

§

Atrus took his eye from the lens of the scope, then straightened up. He nodded to himself, as if some guess of his had been confirmed, then turned and gestured for Catherine to take the sample capsule from the shaft.

While Catherine tested the air sample of the second chamber, Marrim studied the surface of the nearest pillar. Like all of the others, its surface was completely covered in the strange, ancient markings. Esel and Oma had already begun the task of copying down the symbols, and though they had progressed little beyond the first two pillars, that had not stopped them from speculating upon their possible meaning.

Oma was of the opinion that this was an early form of D’ni, if only because of its age and location, but Esel was not so sure.

Marrim, looking at them once more, was struck by how beautiful the markings were.

Catherine came across, showing Atrus the sample. “It’s safe.”

“Good.” Atrus turned and looked across the room. “Irras, bring me a cutter.”

§

The Book was huge, much bigger than a normal D’ni Book, the leather of its cover as thick and hard as slate, but strangest of all was the writing, for like the carvings on the pillars it was in a language none there recognized, though aspects of it were familiar.

For thousands of years the Book had lain there, sealed into the alcove at the far end of that ancient hidden hall. Now, seeing it there, the descriptive panel on the right-hand page glowing softly in the half-light, Marrim felt something between awe and a sheer superstitious fear of it.

Atrus, careful as ever, forbade any of them to touch it. He was determined to find out all he could before they used it.

That was, if they used it at all.

“Burn it,” old Tergahn said, on looking at that strange, alien script. “That’s what I say. If our forefathers thought to bury these chambers and seal the doorways up, then no good can come of it. Burn it, Atrus! Burn it, then seal these chambers up once more.”

“I agree,” Atrus said. “The Book is far too dangerous.”

But Esel and Oma argued otherwise.

“We should copy it,” Oma said. “See what sense we can make of it. In all likelihood it’s related to the markings on the pillars. If we can find a clue to reading it…”

Atrus hesitated. “All right,” he said, after a moment. “But you will take the utmost care in copying it.”

“I still say burn it,” Master Tergahn said, shaking his head, a sour look on his heavily lined face.

“It may well come to that,” Atrus said, glancing at the old man, “but it won’t harm to take a look. That is, if Oma and Esel can unlock the meaning of that script.”

“Burn it,” Tergahn said, more determined than ever. “Burn it now, before any harm is done.”

But Marrim, watching Atrus’s face, saw that Atrus was not about to bow to the old man’s superstitious fear of the Book.

“I hear you, Master Tergahn, and I note what you say. But I shall burn no Book without good cause.”

“Then you’re a fool young Atrus,” Tergahn said, and without another word he stalked away, the sound of his footsteps fading as he vanished into the darkness at the far end of the chamber.

Atrus stared a while, then turned, looking to Oma and Esel once more. “Begin at once,” he said. “The sooner we know what this means, the more comfortable I’ll feel.”

§

Oma sat at his makeshift desk inside the inner cell, dressed in one of the dark-green decontamination suits, complete with gloves and visor. The ancient Book lay to his left, open, the top two pages protected by a thin transparent sheet.

From his position on the other side of the bars, Esel looked on. He, too, wore protective garb.

“Well? Is it the same?” he asked, waiting for Oma to check back in his notes.

Oma ruffled through the pages, then stopped, having clearly found what he was looking for, and read through the earlier passage. Half turning, he shrugged. “I don’t know. It’s *almost* the same…”

“Almost?” Esel’s heavy eyebrows went up.

For the last hour or so the two brothers had been debating a passage partway through the text that seemed to have no correlation with the normal, expected structure of such Descriptive Books. In it, many of the earlier passages they had already translated seemed to be repeated, yet with minor changes of phrasing and emphasis.

“The changes are so minor…It’s almost as if the writer is trying to reinforce the earlier phrases.”

“Hmmm…” Esel frowned deeply. “Reinforcement, yes. But to what purpose?”

“To make it more stable, perhaps?” Atrus said, coming across from where he had been checking one of the big E.V. suits.

“Then why not a direct repetition?”

“Because that would be redundant. By making such subtle changes in the repeated phrases, the writer may have been attempting to make the Age he was writing *more specific*.”

Oma had turned to face Atrus. “But why not simply put in those subtleties first time round?”

“As I said. To make it all more stable. I know from experience that the more subtle you try to be, the more *specific*, the more unstable your Ages are likely to be. It was the one great flaw with the worlds my father wrote.”

“Then why did the practice cease?”

“Who can say? Things change. Perhaps they felt it *was* redundant and let the practice lapse.”

“Maybe,” Oma said. “Yet I rather like it. That is, if it is what you think it is, Master Atrus.”

“And I,” Atrus said, smiling. Then, changing the subject, “Are you still having problems with the phraselogy?”

Oma grinned and looked to his brother. “We were, but we think we’ve mastered that now. Most of the oddities are simple structural inversions in the individual sentences. They probably accord with standard speech patterns of that time.”

Atrus nodded. They knew now, for certain, that the underlying basis of the ancient script *was* D’ni, for the primitive forms matched the modern ones virtually one-to-one.

“So how long do you think it will take you to complete the work?”

Oma looked to his brother. “Two days? Three at most.”

“Then keep to it. And Oma…”

“Yes, Master Atrus?”

“You might ask Marrim and Irras to look at the characters you have not yet managed to translate. They have a fresh eye to the language, and who knows if they might not see what more familiar eyes would overlook.”

“I shall prepare a page for them.”

“Good. Then I shall leave you to it.”

§

It was time, Atrus decided, to make a decision.

For the best part of a day he had sat alone at his desk, reading through the translated copy of the Book.

“Well?” Catherine asked finally, taking a seat across from him.

Atrus considered a moment, then answered her. “It is phrased so strangely. Unlike the D’ni Books we are used to. There is a certain… *ambiguity* to it. And yet, on the surface, it seems a safe and stable world. Those reinforcing phrases would seem to make it so. Yet what if there’s something we’ve overlooked? Some small yet crucial detail.” He shook his head. “I can’t risk one of our people being trapped there.”

“Then do as Master Terhagn said. Burn the Book. At least that way you’ll remove the temptation.”

Atrus laughed. “You think it *is* a temptation, then?”

“Of course it is! The young people think of nothing else…talk of nothing else. Why, they are so curious about what lies on the other side of that page that they would link at once, if you gave permission, without a moment’s thought for their safety.”

Atrus stared at her. “I didn’t realize.”

“On the other hand…”

“What?”

Catherine looked down, a strange smile on her lips. “You or I could go.”

“And take the risk?”

“Or destroy the Book.”

They stared at each other a moment longer, then, with a tiny shrug, Atrus reached across and took one of the last of their small store of blank Linking Books from the side.

“Okay,” he said, glancing up at her. “I’ll write a Linking Book. But *I* go, understand? No one else.”

“Yes, my love,” she answered, watching him open the slender Book then reach across for the pen. “You alone.”

§

When it was done, Atrus gathered together the small team who had been working on the project and told them the news. There were grins and cheers and then, strangely, silence, as the full implication of what Atrus had said sank in.

“But you can’t!” Irras said. “The risk’s far too great!”

“No greater than for any of you,” Atrus answered, determined not to be swayed by any argument of theirs. “I’ve made up my mind and it won’t be changed. I link through, tomorrow morning, once everything’s in place. Carrad, Irras, you’ll be responsible for the suit, all right? Catherine will run the laboratory. Marrim…you’ll assist her. Master Tamon…”

“Atrus…Irras is right. You cannot go. You’re far too important. If anything went wrong…”

“Precisely. If anything went wrong it would be on *my* conscience, and I cannot have that.”

Tamon shrugged, then bowed his head.

“Good,” Atrus said. “Then you, Master Tamon, have a special task. If there are…complications, you will take the Book and burn it. Understand me?”

“Atrus…”

“No arguments,” Atrus said, with a finality that silenced the old Master. But looking around the circle of friends, it was clear to him that none of them were happy with the arrangements.

“Until the morning, then.”

§

It was long after midnight when they returned. Irras led the way, a veiled lamp held up before him as they made their way along the corridor that led to the Guild cell.

Just behind Irras came Marrim and Carrad.

“I really don’t like this,” Marrim whispered, for what must have been the dozenth time.

“You want Atrus to risk himself?” Irras hissed back at her, attempting to be angry and quiet at the same time. “There’s no other way, and you know it. We must test the Age before Atrus links through.”

“But Irras…”

“Irras is right,” Carrad hissed, turning to look back at her. “We owe Atrus everything. If we were to lose him, then we ourselves would be lost.”

Marrim looked down, chastised. But she wasn’t finished yet. “It isn’t right, going behind his back like this.”

“Maybe not,” Irras conceded, “but he would never allow us otherwise. You heard him earlier. He was adamant.”

Marrim sighed. “Okay. Then I will go.”

“You can’t!” Carrad and Irras said as one.

“Why not? I’d be missed less than you two.”

“Nonsense,” Irras said. “I’d miss you dreadfully.”

“And I,” Carrad said. “But that’s beside the point. Irras is going.”

Irras turned, wide-eyed, to face him. “What?”

“You heard,” Carrad said. “Or have you learned how to operate the suit since last we used it?”

“No, I…”

“Then it’s decided. Unless you don’t *want* to go.”

“I’m not afraid, if that’s what you mean.”

“Then it’s decided,” Carrad said, and, turning back, headed swiftly along the corridor, leaving the other two to catch up as best they could.

§

“Are all the sampling capsules fitted, Catherine?”

“They’re all in place. And there’s extra oxygen in the cylinder on your back. Just in case.”

Atrus’s eyes followed Catherine as she busied herself at the laboratory bench. Sensing he was watching her, she looked up. “What is it?”

“Nothing,” he answered. “Are you ready?”

She nodded, her face showing no emotion; as if this were a purely routine matter.

Carrad looked to Catherine, as if about to say something, but Irras frowned at him. “Come on, Carrad. Help me with the helmet now.”

And then all was ready. Slowly, like some great mechanical thing, Atrus stepped into the cage, his back to the inner cell. The door clunked shut behind him, the seals came down. Slowly the cage revolved.

“Good luck!” Catherine called.

With a clunk the bolts slid back again and Atrus stepped out, into the inner cell.

Slowly he turned until he faced them again, then, raising his right glove, he brought it down on the back of his left.

The suit shimmered and then vanished.

Marrim looked across at Catherine, seeing the tension in her, the momentary fear in her eyes, and looked down.

Two seconds later the suit was back.

At once they were swarming about it, reaching through the bars to pluck the sampling capsules from their niches, even as the decontamination unit lowered itself over the suit, spraying Atrus with a fine mist of chemicals.

"Well?" Master Tamon asked. "What did you see?"

Atrus laughed. "Rock…I was surrounded by rock."

Marrim, looking to Irras, gave the faintest smile.

"Rock?" Master Tamon queried, surprised to find Atrus so excited about mere rock.

"Yes, and there's another doorway," Atrus went on excitedly, "like this one, but it, too, is sealed. And there's a Book…almost identical to the one we found! In the same ancient script!"

"A Book!" Master Tamon looked about him, seeing the sudden excitement in every eye.

"Yes," Atrus said. "And if my guess is right it links back here. But come, let's get on with it. Irras, set the timer for five minutes. I want a much better look this time."

§

There was barely room in the alcove to turn, let alone set up the portable drilling machinery, but somehow it was done. Irras, his movements clumsy in the suit, made the first test bore, alone in that distant Age, sensors on the special suit ready to activate his return should there be any sudden change in atmospheric pressure or temperature.

Slowly the drill ate through the rock, then, suddenly, it was through, the bit meeting no further resistance.

Irras drew back; then, sealing the hole, he activated the sampler. As the tiny glass bubble moved back through the center of the driller shaft, he felt the urge to take the scope, which was in the room with him, and

peer through into the space beyond. But he had his orders. They would test the sample first. Then, and only then, would they take a look.

Slotting the sample capsule into the clip on his breast pocket, Irras pressed one hand against the stud in the palm of the other and linked back.

At once Catherine stepped up and, unclipping the capsule, turned and took it back down the steps to her workbench.

Irras looked about him. For once no one spoke.

This was the worst of it—having to wait about in the suit while the tests were made. It was not that it was uncomfortable—at most there was the feeling of cushioned constraint—but at such times Irras found himself questioning Atrus's little-by-little approach and wishing he'd take a risk now and then.

Atrus came across now and smiled at him. "Did the drill bit penetrate very far, Irras?"

"A hand's breadth," he answered.

"Good." Atrus turned, looking down toward where Catherine was busy at the centrifuge. "Well…we'll know very soon now."

"Atrus?"

"Yes?"

"Have you thought any more about *why* it might have been sealed?"

Atrus hesitated, then shook his head.

"And Master Tergahn's view?"

All were listening now. Last night Master Tergahn had reiterated his opinion that they should leave well be, that they should burn the Linking Book and reseal the chambers.

Atrus shrugged. "I only wish we knew more about the Great King. I have a vague recollection that my grandmother, Anna, once mentioned something about it, but what it was I can't recall."

For a moment he stared away into the shadows at the far end of the chamber, as if lost in thought, then he returned and, smiling, went down the steps again to stand beside Catherine at the workbench.

"Well?" he asked.

She glanced at him, then continued with her work. "I'll need to do more tests."

"Stale air?"

“Quite the contrary,” she answered. “If my results are right, the air in there is fresh. And there are living organisms in it. Pollen, too.”

“Pollen?”

Catherine nodded. “Yes. Now let me get on with things, Atrus. As soon as I know something more…”

“…you’ll let me know. But there’s definitely air? Fresh air?”

“Yes!” she said. “Now leave me to get on.”

Atrus turned, then hastened up the stairs, gesturing to Irras as he went.

“Okay. Let’s get you back inside. Let’s see what’s behind that wall.”

§

It took them days to cut a big enough hole in the wall, the task made more difficult by the fact that they could not use the portable power tools within the alcove, and that the two men, standing side by side, had little room to maneuver. They had spent the best part of an hour laboring beneath the light of a single lamp, careful not to nudge each other as, using hammer and chisel, they chipped out the channels in the rock. But now the job was done. Three metal hooks had been screwed into the partially cut section of the wall, and a link of chain threaded through them. Irras now held the end of that chain, the powerful hydraulics of the special gloves he was wearing maintaining a tight grip as Atrus swung the great hammer.

The section of wall gave with a great crunch, the weight of the stone making it slew to one side, but the chain restrained it, keeping it from falling.

“Are you all right?” Atrus asked.

“I’m fine,” Irras said, straining to keep the thing from sliding away from him.

“Good. Then lower it slowly. I’ll shine the lamp through.”

Atrus reached up and unclipped the lamp, then poked it through the gap.

There was an eerie silence. The only sound was that of their own breathing. That and the grating of the stone, the click-click-click of the

chain links against the edge of the wall as Irras lowered the section to the ground.

"Good," Atrus said, as the huge piece of rock came to rest against the floor. "I'll step through and secure it."

Personally, Irras would just have kicked the thing in, but Atrus was keen to do as little damage as he could. *We are explorers*, he'd said, *not vandals.*

Even so…

He heard Atrus's gasp, sensed as much as saw him turn and raise the lamp high.

"Atrus?"

The lamp swung back. In its sudden brightness he could see a huge chamber, not unlike the chamber back in D'ni, with row after row of broad, stone shelves climbing the walls above the pillars.

Another library.

Only all of these shelves were empty.

Irras stepped out into the chamber and stood beside Atrus, taking in the sight. Somehow those empty shelves made it seem even more desolate than it otherwise might have been. And there was dust everywhere—huge drifts of dust, like sand, covering the marbled floor, in all but one or two places.

There was a sense of great age. Of long centuries of neglect.

Atrus gestured toward the far end of the chamber. "Let's see what's down there."

They walked across, their footsteps muffled, small clouds of dust lifting, then floating like smoke upon the air.

Atrus stopped. There was a huge doorway before them. Like those in D'ni, it had a massive circle of stone surrounding it, its pale surface decorated with a ring of stars, but unlike those in D'ni, this one seemed to be ajar.

Atrus walked toward it, then mounted the steps.

It *was* ajar.

He set down the lamp, then stepped closer, peering through the crack, unwilling to shine a light through that narrow space until he knew what was on the other side.

It was dark, yet not as dark as the chamber in which he stood, and after a moment his eyes grew accustomed to the half-light within.

Another chamber, larger, grander than the library, but in ruin, a number of its mighty pillars fallen, its great arched ceiling cracked in places, revealing a cloud-strewn night of brilliant stars.

And now Irras came and stood beside him, squinting into the darkness.

“Ruins,” he said quietly, unable to keep the disappointment from his voice.

But Atrus made no comment, only: “Come, let’s fetch the others. It’s time we explored this Age.”

PART FOUR

TORN PAGES CURL AND BROWN.

THE FLAMES FLY UP.

IN THE FLICKERING LIGHT A CRY.

WHO WILL LIFT THE FALLEN STONES.

WHO WILL LINK THE BROKEN CHAIN?

--FROM THE KOROKH JIMAH

VV. 11383-86

Atrus turned to look as, one by one, his party linked through into the alcove, then stepped out into the chamber.

They had brought with them lamps and provisions, and as Oma, the last of them, stepped through, that ancient place seemed ablaze with the brilliant light of the fire-marbles.

Concerned that they might reveal themselves to hostile eyes, Atrus had them extinguish all but one of the lamps. Then, and only then, did he lead them across to the door at the far end of the chamber.

Though the door was open a crack, long eons of dereliction had wedged it in place, such that even with four of them heaving against its carved stone face they could not budge it the smallest fraction. Eventually, it was Marrim who, squeezing through the gap, set about clearing some of the debris from beneath it.

That done they tried again, and this time managed to move it back an inch or two, allowing the rest to squeeze through.

That second chamber, which Atrus had named the Temple, was a forlorn sight. It was not long now until the dawn, and in that last hour of the night it seemed impossible that they would find anything that might justify the time they had spent investigating this mystery.

This was a dead world. Or a world so long-abandoned as made little difference.

Marrim, standing in the center of that ruined chamber, turned full circle, taking in the desolation, then looked up through one of the great cracks in the fallen ceiling at the predawn sky.

It felt, to her, as if some ancient tragedy had befallen this place. Some tale so old that even the D'ni, that most ancient of races, had no record of it.

She turned back, looking to Atrus, who stood in the midst of the others, talking quietly, then spoke. "Atrus? What happened here?"

It was not that she expected him to answer; it was just that the question haunted her. Why was there no record of this place? And why had the Books been sealed off all these thousands of years?

"I don't know," Atrus answered, coming across. "Perhaps we'll learn." He turned slightly, addressing them all once more. "We'll split into groups and explore the site. One hour. And if anyone finds anything, return here at once."

They all knew what to do. They had done this now so many times it was second nature to them. Even so, it felt different this time, and as they stepped out through the great archway at the far end of the Temple, there were exclamations of surprise.

The Temple sat at the center of a host of other buildings, on a huge plinth of stone above the rest, while about the edges of that ancient town a great wood grew, the massive trees looming over that scene of ruin.

Not a building stood undamaged. In the growing light of dawn, they could see that long centuries had passed since anyone had ventured

here. Weeds grew thickly over the fallen stone.

It was as if the tragedy that had befallen D'ni had also visited this place. Here, too, a great civilization had once flourished, only to crumble into dust.

"Well," Atrus said, when no one had moved for several minutes. "Shall we see what there is to see?"

§

"Master Atrus!" Marrim said breathlessly. "We've found something!"

Atrus turned to her. "What is it, Marrim?"

She grinned. "You must see this!"

At the outskirts of the ruined town, there was a way that wound between the massive trees following the course of an ancient stone drainage pipe that, over the long years, had been exposed to the air and now thrust up from the earth, like the rounded back of a huge snake.

They walked atop that ancient way, until they came to a massive slab of ochre rock that climbed the air in front of them.

"Here?" Atrus queried, for there seemed no way forward, but Marrim went on, climbing the rock like a mountain goat, seeming to find handholds where there appeared to be none.

Shrugging, Atrus followed, finding it much easier than he'd thought. The rock was porous and easy to grip; even so, he felt breathless by the time he'd come to the top of it.

As Catherine came near the top, he reached down and helped her up. Only then did he turn around and look. Only then did he understand just how high up they were.

And even as he registered that fact, his mind seemed to flip and his mouth fell open in sheer astonishment as he took in what he was looking at.

They were on the edge of a great plateau, a sheer drop of maybe half a mile directly beneath them, while below them, stretching from horizon to horizon, was the most beautiful land Atrus had ever seen; a land of lush, verdant farmland, massive fields divided by meandering waterways that sparkled in the early morning sunlight. Scattered here and

there amid that vast landscape were buildings—huge, beautiful buildings of gleaming white stone, each set atop a grassy mound, and each one quite unlike anything Atrus had ever seen before, with a grandeur and elegance that took the breath. Godlike they were, such that, staring at them, Atrus wondered what manner of people inhabited this land.

All this Atrus took in at a glance, yet looking more distant, he caught his breath, seeing, in the far distance, its contours veiled in mist, another huge plateau, much larger than that on which they stood, up the soaring walls of which climbed a vast city of the same gleaming stone, the whole great edifice topped by a single massive building, with great towers and gilded domes.

Even at such a distance, Atrus understood at once. Here was something far greater than D'ni; a civilization so vast and ordered that it made his schemes for rebuilding that ancient home seem futile. No wonder they had let the ruins behind him lie untended. What need had they for such when they lived their daily lives amid such splendor?

Looking out across that magnificent landscape, Atrus felt a longing he had never thought to feel. A longing to belong to the land he had first seen only a moment before. And, looking to Catherine, who stood beside him, he saw it in her eyes, too.

"It's beautiful," she whispered.

"Yes," he answered, taking her hand.

For a time they stood there, silent, lost in a haze of astonishment. Then there was a shout from below, from the foot of the rock.

"Atrus? *Atrus!* What's going on up there?"

But Atrus had turned back, staring openmouthed once more, his eyes filled with astonishment as they flitted from wonder to wonder in that vast and beautiful land.

§

Atrus dangled in the harness, his left hand steadying him against the rough surface of the cliff face, as he leaned across and marked the trunk. Below him was a thousand feet of tree and rock, an almost vertical drop with here and there a yawning chasm reaching deep into the shadowed interior of the plateau.

Some fifty feet up from him, yet still some way from the summit, Carrad and Irras also hung, Irras fixing the two broad straps about the trunk of the marked tree, while Carrad began to saw through the base.

Above them was a path of neatly cut stumps, reaching up to where Master Tamon was busily organizing the construction of the platform, using the trunks they had cut earlier. They had been at the task two hours now and already a skeletal structure jutted out over the edge, a skein of ropes securing it until a more permanent fixing could be made.

Young Jenniran was in charge of making and fitting the winch, while Catherine and Marrim were busy organizing food and supplies for the expedition, a dozen backpacks laid out in a neat line at the back of the clearing.

Atrus turned, spinning expertly on the rope, stopping himself with the toe of his boot against the rock face. Looking up, he studied the channel they had cut through the trees and nodded to himself. He had chosen this route because of the slight overhand, turning a natural obstacle to his advantage. It would have been almost impossible to climb down from the plateau, and certainly quite unfeasible to attempt to clamber back in case of an emergency, but when the chairlift was working they could get up and down the cliff in minutes, and transport whatever equipment they needed—not to speak of its use in an emergency.

But he would need to replace Irras and Carrad soon. It would have been heavy work even on steady ground, and though they were still enthusiastic, he could see they were flagging—the slightly built Irras more than his sturdier cousin.

He called up to them, keeping his voice low enough to carry, but not strong enough to be overheard from below.

“Two more, then send replacements down.”

They did not argue, merely nodded, yet he could sense their disappointment. There was nothing they liked more than a challenge, and this—the scaling of this gargantuan cliff—was a challenge. Looking down again, Atrus felt his astonishment return, renewed every time he looked. Below him the massive trees stood like vast pillars in some demented mountain hall, nightmarishly tilted to the vertical.

At the foot of the plateau, glimpsed through the heavy foliage, was a huge rock, a great spur of dark ochre, its surface bare.

Atrus narrowed his eyes, staring through his lenses at it, then shook his head. It could not be helped. They would have to stop the chairlift some way above that, before the tree cover gave way to barren rock, and run rope ladders down, because if anyone were watching…

He tugged on the rope, once, twice, a third time. Slowly it was let out from above. Slowly he descended, using his feet to push himself out from the rock face. This tree…yes, and that.

But what if they are watching us? he thought. What if they've been watching us since we came through—waiting for us to come down? What if they're setting their ambush even now?

It was not a fear he wished to share, but he had to face it. Whoever they were, the native people of this Age might not readily welcome intruders; even ones as peaceful as themselves.

Atrus looked at his timer. From his estimates they had another six, maybe seven hours of daylight—time enough to finish the chairlift and make the descent. But he did not like the idea of going down there just as night fell. No. They would complete the chairlift and test it. Then they would secure it at the top of the plateau and spend the night up there.

Maybe so, yet even he felt impatient at the thought. He wanted to explore this world more than any other he had ever seen, and he knew that all the others felt the same. He had seen for himself how their eyes kept going to that wondrous landscape, awed—one might almost say *stunned*—by its beauty.

They would descend tomorrow, at dawn; unarmed, yet prepared, if necessary, to fight their way back to the cliff and back to D'ni.

And the Linking Book?

He would have Master Tamon rig something up to dispose of the Book if an emergency arose. It was easily done, after all.

From above came the sound of sawing, then a call. As Atrus looked up he saw another of the great trunks lift away and then sway its slow way up the cliff face toward the platform.

Tomorrow then, he thought, and turned, facing outward once again, seeing the rich greenness of the land there just beyond the branches, below him and to either side. *Tomorrow…*

§

That evening they camped in the clearing. The day had been long and hard, but no one wanted to retire, and after supper they gathered on the platform, sitting there long into the night, staring silently out into the sable blackness, upon which was scattered a thousand tiny patches of glowing pearl, like stars upon the night's dark ocean.

"What do you think?" Irras asked finally.

"I think I could sit here forever," Marrim answered him, and there was a murmur of laughter at that.

"Maybe so," Atrus said, standing and stretching, "yet we should get some rest now."

"Five minutes," Marrim pleaded, then, pointing, added, "Look, the moon is rising."

And, true enough, a single, small blue-white moon was just visible above the distant horizon; the smallest of the three that this Age apparently possessed.

Atrus turned, looking across the vast, pearled darkness at that thumbnail of glowing light, entranced by the sight, then nodded. "All right. Five minutes, then."

§

Dawn found them standing at the foot of the plateau, in deep shadow, the great spur of ochre rock beneath their feet.

A pleasant wood lay below them, on the far side of which was a watercourse. But Atrus did not mean to travel that way just yet. First he would send out scouts, to see what could be learned about the land and its inhabitants. For this task he chose Irras and Jenniran. He had them set their timers, then promise to be back within the half hour.

They returned with just under two minutes to spare, perspiring heavily. The land, it seemed, was prosperous and there were signs of recent activity, but they had seen not a single person.

Cautious as ever, Atrus sent out Carrad and Esel to make another sweep of the land, but when they returned half an hour later, it was only to

confirm what Irras and Jenniran had reported. The land was beautiful but empty.

Taking Catherine aside, Atrus debated the matter a moment, then addressed the rest of them once more.

“If my estimates are correct, the nearest of the dwellings we saw from the plateau is a two-hour walk from here. We’ll make for that, sending out scouts along the way. We have ample food and water, so our only problem will be one of secrecy. If you must talk, speak to an ear, otherwise remain silent. And keep to the trees. But don’t bunch. Keep in a line behind me.”

He paused, then added, “Jenniran, I have a special task for you. You will be our anchor, here at the foot of the plateau. From time to time I shall send a messenger back to report on what we have found. I need you to relay those messages back to D’ni, through Master Tamon.”

Atrus turned back. “Now let us be on our way. But remember, though the land looks peaceful, we do not know the nature or customs of these people. So take care at all times.”

And with that, Atrus turned, leading the way down off the rock and onto the plain below.

§

An hour’s walking brought them to the middle of an orchard of low trees with dark red trunks whose verdant branches bore a strange purple fruit. There they rested, seated on the rich green grass that lay like a carpet between the smooth boles of the trees.

The day was hot, but it was cool enough beneath the branches. If Atrus was right, the great house they had seen from the plateau lay directly ahead, but as yet they had had no sight of it. Atrus sat there now, his measuring instruments open on the grass beside him as he wrote in his notebook.

Marrim closed her eyes and rested back on her elbows, her legs stretched out. For a time she drifted, thoughtless, her head filled with the hum of the local insects. Earlier, she had caught and studied one of them—a large, beelike insect, its “fur” bright red with a spiraling black stripe about the abdomen—and found that it lacked a sting. But so it was here.

The beauty of it, combined with the warmth of the day, washed over her like the waves of a warm ocean on a summer's day.

Oma, who had wandered away for a moment, returned to the clearing, gazing about distractedly, one of the dark, perfectly spherical fruits in his hand. Seeing Atrus he looked across and smiled.

"Oma!" Atrus bellowed. "What in the Maker's name are you doing?"

Oma blinked, then stared at the partially eaten fruit in his hand and, horrified, dropped it as if it were a burning coal. "I'm sorry, I…" He swallowed. "I forgot, Master Atrus."

"Forgot!" Atrus leaned toward him. "If you're sick, you look after yourself, you understand?"

"But Master Atrus…"

Atrus turned his back. "All right," he said, "we'd best press on. Irras…scout ahead."

As Irras hurried away, they rose silently and, slipping on their packs, made their way slowly after Atrus, spread out like shadows beneath the trees.

They had not gone far when Irras returned.

"There's a path," he said. "It runs straight."

"Toward the house?" Atrus asked.

Irras shook his head. "It crosses our way."

"All right. Let's go and see."

It was a broad, well-tended path of loosely chipped white stone, raised up just above the level of the ground to either side. Small culverts, containing the narrow irrigation channels that were everywhere in this land, ran beneath it at regular intervals, while on its far side was a great field of tall, exotic-looking plants with flame-tipped flowers, and beyond that a tree-capped ridge, its foliage dense and dark. As for the path itself, just as Irras had said, it ran straight to left and right. Yet the house, if Atrus's calculations were correct, lay directly ahead.

"Maybe it curves," Esel suggested.

"It doesn't look as though it curves," Irras answered him.

"No," Atrus agreed. "Yet maybe we should follow it a while. Perhaps it meets another path, farther along."

Carrad made to climb up onto the path, but Atrus called him back. "No, Carrad. We keep to the trees."

Chastened, Carrad did as he was told.

Turning to the right they began to walk. At first they were silent, but after a while, reassured by the peacefulness of the day, the beauty of the land through which they moved, Atrus began to talk.

“It makes you wonder,” he said, pausing to turn and look about him.

Catherine came alongside him. “Wonder what?”

“What kind of people they are who tend this land.”

“A generous people,” she said, without hesitation.

Atrus looked to her. The rest of the party had stopped and were looking about them at the surrounding fields, fanning themselves in the afternoon heat. “You think so?”

“I do. Just look at how rich this land is. There’s so much here. They can afford to be generous.”

Atrus smiled. But Catherine went on. “Where there’s little to go round, each man—and woman—must fight for their share. But when there’s so much…”

“It isn’t always so,” Atrus said. “When I lived with my grandmother, we had little or nothing, yet I would not say we were ungenerous.”

Catherine laughed. “That’s different. What if there had been three or four families living in the cleft, each needing to rake a living from the little that was there? What then?”

“Maybe,” he said, without any real conviction. “But I feel you’re right.”

They walked on, lost in the day’s beauty, each with their own thoughts about the wonders that lay on every side. Half a mile farther on, the path gently climbed, crossing a small, delicately arched bridge. Beneath its single span flowed a stream; a broad blue channel that meandered gently through the fields to their right, finally losing itself among the trees far to the left.

Indeed, they were so taken by their surroundings that it was a moment or two before anyone saw the boat that was moored on the far side of the bridge.

“Atrus!” Oma hissed. “Look!”

The boat was long and broad, its prow elegantly curved, a great awning of yellow silk overhanging the deck, below which rested a number

of elegant-looking couches. Beneath that awning, one hand resting lightly on the supporting pole, stood a tall young man dressed in a flowing robe of lavender edged with black. His hair was midnight black and cut in a strange yet elegant fashion, and his eyes were a deep sea green. But the strangest thing of all about him was that, though he looked directly at them, he seemed not to have seen them at all.

"Do I see you?"

Atrus stopped dead. The words, spoken in a clear yet heavily accented D'ni, had come from the stranger, yet still the man did not seem to look at them.

Was he blind? Marrim wondered, seeing the lack of movement in those eyes. Or were those green eyes lenses of some kind?

Atrus took another step toward him. "Where *are* we?"

The young man did not seem to hear him. "Do I *see* you?" he repeated.

Atrus turned, looking to the others, puzzled by the young man's behavior, then turned back, stepping closer, stopping no more than four or five paces from where the young man stood in the boat.

"We are from D'ni," Atrus said, speaking slowly and precisely. "We have come from D'ni."

There was a movement in the young man's eyes—a movement that wasn't quite a movement, more a reassessment. A look of understanding slowly entered those orbs that, until a moment before, had seemed sightless.

"From Ro'D'ni?"

Atrus hesitated, then nodded.

"Then come," he said, the D'ni words clear despite the strange accent. "You must be hungry after your long journey."

The young man looked about him, taking each of them in one at a time, his eyes resting slightly longer on the figure of Marrim, the eyes narrowing slightly as he noted her boyish hair.

Then, putting out both hands to Atrus, he introduced himself.

"Forgive me. My name is Hadre Ro'Jethhe, son of Jethhe Ro'Jethhe. Welcome…welcome to Terahnee."

§

The boat moved slowly, silently down the stream, its smooth passage within the channel unaided by oar or motor such that the D'ni, seated aboard the strange craft, looked about them in wonder.

Wherever they looked, their eyes found delights, as if this while land had been sculpted—each plant and bush arranged *just so* to please the eye. The shape of the land, its textures and coloring: each element blended perfectly, with now and then a contrast—be it a brightly colored flower or a specially shaped rock—that would cause them to smile with sheer pleasure.

As for their host, though he was genial enough, he was not greatly forthcoming. Whenever Atrus asked a direct question, Hadre would answer vaguely, or change the subject, or even act as if Atrus had not spoken, and this, like his behavior in those first few moments they had met, puzzled Atrus. And yet there seemed no darker reason for it. From what Hadre did say, it seemed they were to stay at the great house that evening. Moreover, the young man made it quite clear that they were very welcome and that if there was anything they wanted—*anything*—they were only to ask and he would see to it.

They sat back, lounging against the broad, ornately decorated gunwales of the boat, entranced by their surroundings. As the boat came around a turn in the stream and, passing beneath a decorative arch, glided into a sunlit glade—a small bowl in the surrounding hills—Atrus was surprised to find a picnic set up for them.

They climbed from the boat, amazed. A dozen couches were set up within that pleasant space, and at the center of it all a great table was piled high with food—all manner of fruits and other delicacies—that, when they finally tasted them, proved delicious beyond all belief.

Oma, who had sustained no harm from his earlier forgetfulness, now turned to their host and smiled. "This is most excellent."

Hadre smiled. "I am glad you like it, Master Oma," he said, impressing them all, for Oma had been named but once on the journey, and then only in passing.

But that was not the only instance. Hadre had only to be told something once and he remembered it.

When they had eaten their fill, Hadre ushered them back onto the boat and they continued their journey.

Once more the land opened up about them as they glided silently through an endless vista of wonders. As they came around one bend they were confronted by a great waterfall of tiny blue flowers, beneath which they passed, finding themselves a moment later within a cavernous space, the roof of which was formed by the roots of a single massive tree. And on they went, past sculpted banks of wonderfully scented blooms and out into a valley where, directly ahead of them, the great house rose like a glacier from the mound on which it sat.

“The Maker’s name!” Atrus said, under his breath, not merely because the building was far bigger than he had guessed at from a distance, but because he saw now what they all suddenly saw: that what they had taken to be simple whiteness was not in fact white at all but a whole rainbow of colors within the stone, as if the whole building were one great prism. Yet the stone was not transparent; the different colors in the stone seemed to shift with every moment, as if alive.

Closer they came and closer still, and then, with a strange little rush, the channel turned, taking them through a long, low archway and beneath the walls of the building into a huge, shadowed courtyard of startlingly blue marble, about which level after level of balconies looked down, great clusters of gorgeously scented blooms—bright gold and startling crimson, jet black and emerald—trailing from them. Six massive stone ramps led up from the courtyard, each entering the house through a beautifully carved wooden gateway, beyond which were huge double doors inlaid with pearl.

“Home,” Hadre said simply. Then, stepping from the boat, he turned and bowed graciously. “Welcome Atrus and Catherine. Welcome all. Welcome to the house of Ro’Jethhe.”

§

Atrus stepped through the great entrance arch and into a hall of cool marble, at the center of which was a round pool. A circle of slender pillars surrounded it, each a distinct color, the stone sculpted to resemble the stems of flowers, each pillar blossoming where it met the ceiling, the

giant petals folding outward, so that the ceiling seemed like a huge floral bed, the interplay of color delightful to the eye.

Atrus stared up at it a moment then looked to his young host. “Is all of this great building yours, Hadre Ro’Jethhe?”

Hadre turned, smiling pleasantly. “It is my father’s house. And all the lands surrounding it are his.”

They walked on until they stood beside the pool, looking down into its crystal depths. The pillars to either side of them soared up into the ceiling, fifty, maybe sixty feet above their heads, dwarfing them. From this close the stone, which, from the doorway, had seemed frail, now looked thoroughly solid and immovable.

Thus far Hadre had been the only person they had seen in all of Terahnee, but now two other men—smaller and more stockily built, discernibly different from Hadre, and not merely in their physical attributes—entered the hall from a narrow doorway to the left and, hastening across, bowed low before Hadre. They wore long flowing cloaks of a soft wine-red cloth, but what was most distinct about them was their silver hair—not white, but silver, like a fine wire—which was swept back off their foreheads and tied in a tight bunch at their necks.

“Master?” the elder of them asked. As he turned, Atrus noticed he had two vertical purple stripes beneath his right ear.

“Kaaru…Jaad…” Hadre said, “these are my guests. You will take great care of them and see to all their needs.”

“Master!” the two men said as one, then stepped back, seeming almost to vanish as they slipped into the shadows beside the pillars.

Hadre turned back to his guests and smiled. “And now you will forgive me, Atrus, but I must tell my father the news. He will want to greet you personally.”

§

After Hadre had gone the two servants led Atrus and his party through into a second, smaller hall where, once again, a meal had been laid out ready for them.

As in the clearing in the wood, a number of couches had been placed in a circle about the center of the room, within easy reach of the

endless delicacies that graced the central table.

Having seen that they were comfortable, Kaaru and Jaad stepped back, seeming to blend once more into the shadows of the walls.

This second hall was both more modest—in its scale—and more opulent—in its detail—than the previous one. Marrim, looking about her, could not help but admire the care these people took. Each bowl, each spoon, each tiny fork, was a work of art, not to speak of the arms of the couches, or the carved panels that filled each wall between the swirling marble pillars.

Not a surface was overlooked. Even the simplest thing was decorated. Yet the overall impression was not overly decorative. There was an underlying simplicity that formed a perfect contrast with the intricate designs. Nothing was out of place here; nothing overwrought.

Looking across, Marrim saw how Atrus stared at the myriad of things surrounding him, looking from one to another with the same awed look, and knew at once that he, too, had seen what she had seen. Yet when he looked up, there was a strange, almost wistful smile on his face. Seeing it, Catherine, who had also been watching him, asked:

"Atrus? What is it?"

Atrus picked up one of the delicate spoons, tracing the molded pattern on its bowl with his thumb, then laughed; a strange, brief, haunted laugh.

"All this," he said finally. "It reminds me."

"Of Anna?"

Atrus nodded. "There was never a surface she could leave alone. It was as though the whole universe was a blank page on which she was compelled to write." He paused, then. "I sense it is the same for these people. I look around and see the same blend of simplicity and embellishment."

"They must be great dreamers," Catherine said.

"Yes, and fine craftsmen, too," Esel added, looking up from the beautifully glazed bowl he was holding.

Marrim nodded, then reached out to take the cool drink so close to hand, sipping at the blood-red liquid delicately. Like the drink she had had in the clearing, this was both refreshing and intoxicating, though not in the way that wine was intoxicating. There was such a scent to this, such an

overwhelming taste, that it was as if her senses had been numbed until the moment she had tasted it.

"This Hadre and his father," Irras said. "They must be very rich men to own all this. They surely cannot *all* live like this."

"On the contrary…" a voice boomed from the far side of the chamber, "ours is but a humble estate."

At once they were all on their feet, facing the newcomer—a handsome, elderly looking man with neat dark hair and a stern, patrician air. Yet even as that sternness registered on the mind, the old man smiled and, opening his arms, walked across and embraced Atrus warmly.

"Atrus! Friends and companions of Atrus! I am Jethhe Ro'Jethhe, and you are welcome to my house. Stay as long as you will. My home is your home."

And with this little speech complete, he walked among them, taking hands or embracing them, coming to Marrim last.

"Young lady," he said, with a slight bow of his head, as if he spoke to someone high above him in status. "I am indeed most pleased to make your acquaintance."

Marrim, both delighted and embarrassed by the sudden attention, ducked her head down, feeling a faint flush come to her neck.

And then it was Atrus's turn to thank Hadre's father for his hospitality.

"Think nothing of it," Ro'Jethhe said, with a lazy gesture of dismissal. "I am sure you would do the same were we the visitors and you the hosts."

Atrus smiled. "Indeed we would."

The old man's smile encompassed them all. "Well, then. So it is." Then, turning to Irras. "But forgive me my rudeness, Master Irras. You asked a question, and I gave you but a partial answer. Come then, let us all be seated once more, and I shall answer *all* your questions."

§

It was late afternoon when finally Jethhe Ro'Jethhe clapped his hands and stood.

“Kaaru! Show my guests to their rooms!”

At once his servant was at his back, waiting to do his bidding. Turning to Atrus, Ro’Jethhe smiled. “You have traveled far, my friends. I am sure you will wish to bathe and change your clothes before tonight’s entertainment.”

“Entertainment?” Atrus sat forward. It was the first time Ro’Jethhe had mentioned it.

“Oh, it’s nothing much. A simple thing. A few friends—local landowners—will be invited. And my sons, of course. It will be a chance for you to meet everyone.”

Atrus smiled. “We thank you, Jethhe Ro’Jethhe, for your kindness.”

“Not at all,” the old man said, looking about him and smiling. “I am glad you are here, Atrus. You and all your party. And remember, whatever you want, you have only to ask.”

The two men bowed to one another, then Ro’Jethhe turned and swept from the room, his son hurrying to catch him up.

§

The bedroom, like all else, was massive. A huge bed—big enough, it seemed, to sleep a small village—rested in the center of a huge, high-ceilinged room. Here the pillars were thick, eight-sided things of a midnight basalt. Eight of them formed an octagon about the center of that long and airy chamber, thrusting up out of a floor that was made of wood, the broad slats of which were coated with a fine dark red lacquer inset with all manner of ingenious patterns. The partition doors were huge, paneled things, set into walls so thick they reminded Atrus of a fortress he had visited once on an ancient D’ni Age. Most impressive of all, however, was the wide balcony that led off of the room, and gave a perfect view of the surrounding countryside.

A fine silk hanging of pale lemon and blue shimmered in the late afternoon breeze as Catherine stepped beneath it and out onto the stone flags of the balcony.

“Atrus…”

He stepped through, joining her there at the balustrade, the two of them silent a moment as they stared out across the sloping lawns toward a copse of trees; no tree the same, the combination of colorings and textures a delight to the eye. A strange bird called, high and sweet.

Threading her arm through his, Catherine smiled up at him. “Have you ever dreamt of such a place, Atrus?”

“No,” he said. “My mind reels before it, Catherine. To think that it is *all* like this.”

For Jethhe Ro’Jethhe had told them that far from being a rich man, he was but a common citizen, and that there were many—the governor of the district among them—who lived in a far more palatial manner, though how that could be Atrus could not imagine, for this was luxury beyond anything he had ever experienced. Moreover, Ro’Jethhe himself had proved an intelligent and witty man, immensely cultured, quick to understand, and always generous in his comments. Atrus had warmed to him at once.

Even so, it was hard to take in much of what Ro’Jethhe said, and had Atrus not already had that glimpse of the land from the plateau, he might have counted it as boastful. Was this place *really* as big as Ro’Jethhe claimed? Two hundred million citizens! It was difficult to imagine, even though he had seen how the land stretched away from horizon to horizon. Why, if they *all* lived like this, then the wealth of this land must be truly phenomenal. D’ni, even at its height, was as nothing beside it.

While they bathed and changed, Catherine and Atrus talked further of what they had learned from Jethhe Ro’Jethhe.

Terahnee was ruled by a king, supported by a council of advisers, under which were the district governors. Yet astonishingly enough, despite the size of the kingdom, there was no equivalent of the Guild of Maintainers. *No one policed Terahnee because no one needed to*. It was that, more than anything else that they had seen or heard, that most impressed Atrus, for to him it revealed the high moral standard this culture had attained.

This was a land without wars, or theft, or fraud.

“All this…” Atrus said, gesturing at the mosaics, the statuary, and all the other innumerable beautiful things that surrounded them. “*All* of

this is quite remarkable, yet without a moral depth it is nothing. The true, defining mark of a civilization is how its people treat each other."

"They have servants…" Catherine began.

"Yes, but they clearly treat them well, as I'm sure you've noticed. Kaaru and Jaad might bow their heads before their masters, yet there is nothing servile about them. Indeed, I sense an air of great pride about them."

"Do you not find that *strange*, Atrus?"

"In a land such as this? No. Some must work while others plan and organize the work. So it is in all societies. So it was to a degree in D'ni."

"To a degree." But Catherine left it there. Besides, she was not really in disagreement with Atrus. To keep a world this beautiful must take a great deal of organizing. And Atrus was right. She had never before met with such servants.

Changing tack, she asked another question that had been playing on her mind.

"Atrus? Do you think they are your kin?"

"D'ni, you mean?"

"Yes. There is the common language, after all…"

"That might have been acquired, or shared, maybe, back in the distant past. It's possible this was an Age that, losing its connection with D'ni, went its own way."

"Do you think so?"

"I'd say it was highly likely. For one, they do not share the visual weakness of the D'ni. As far as I have seen, they wear no lenses. And the style in which they build…it is as different from the D'ni as it could possibly be. Their extensive use of wood, for instance."

"True," Catherine said, "but that can be easily explained. In D'ni they had no trees. Here there are millions of them—thousands of millions. Besides, over millennia societies take different paths. We should expect such differences."

"Maybe so," Atrus said, pulling on a silken jacket that had been left out on the bed for him, "but until I know for certain that there is a link, I will not assume one. The fact that they speak a version of our language proves nothing."

Catherine was about to pursue the subject when there was a knocking at the door.

“Come!” Atrus said, turning to face the doorway.

But it was only Marrim, Irras, and Carrad. They spilled into the room, all smiles and excitement.

“Master Atrus!” Irras said. “There’s a library!”

“It’s huge!” Carrad added, as they left the room and hurried down a long, broad corridor, the ceiling of which seemed like the bottom of a well it was so far above them.

“And the books!” Marrim added. “You’ve never seen anything like it!”

Atrus smiled at that last, yet when he stepped into the deeply recessed doorway, he stopped dead, astonished.

The library was not a single room, as he’d expected. Indeed, it was not a room at all, but a great hall, with, just beyond it, a second and even a third hall, the walls of which were filled, floor to high ceiling, with books —endless leather-bound books. Enough, it seemed, to fill D’ni!

“And these are simple *landowners?*” Catherine said, voicing his own thought.

“Atrus?”

Atrus turned, surprised, to find Hadre there behind him in the doorway.

“Forgive us, Hadre. We did not mean to pry.”

“There is nothing to forgive,” Hadre said, smiling and gesturing that they should go through, into the library. “Whatever you wish to see. As my father said, our home is yours while you stay with us.”

“You are both most generous.”

“Not at all,” Hadre said. “My people love to share the things of the mind. We are great lovers of books. As I sense *you* are.”

He clapped his hands and at once a servant appeared in the doorway to their right. It was not Kaaru or Jaad this time but a much older man. Even so, he wore a similar wine-red cloth, and had the same silver hair, the same striped markings beneath his right ear.

“Master?”

“You will not be needed, Duura. I will see to my guests myself.”

“As you wish, Master.” And with a bow, Duura departed.

“So?” Hadre said, looking to Atrus, smiling once more. “Where would you like to start?”

§

The library was not the only wonder in the house. Catherine's favorite was a great hall of glass partitions filled with the most astonishing plants—in effect, a massive indoor greenhouse, whose levels and separate chambers were each lit at different times of the day from a great lens of a window that was set into the ceiling of the chamber. One could climb within the mazelike chamber into rooms, the floors and walls of which were solid glass, permitting you to believe you walked within a lush, exotic jungle, the air intoxicatingly sweet, the light like that of the primal forest on an untouched world.

Beyond that, and in total contrast, was a long gallery, the light within which seemed to have filtered down through the long centuries. There, to either side, in three long rows on walls that seemed to go on endlessly, hung what seemed like a thousand life-size portraits.

"These," Hadre said proudly, "were Ro'Jethhe."

Staring at them, at those endless variations on the same face, Atrus understood at last just how old this place really was, for all of these men had in turn been master of this house. This long, unbroken chain of fathers and sons spoke more eloquently than anything of the durability of this society.

"You say all of these were Ro'Jethhe," Atrus said. "Was that their name, or their title?"

Hadre turned to him and smiled. "When they were younger they had other names—names their mothers gave them, just as my brother Eedrah and I have names. But when it was their time, each lost that name. You understand?"

Catherine nodded. "So you, in turn, will be…"

"Ro'Jethhe." He smiled. "But that will be many years from now. My father is in the prime of his life."

"Your people live a long time, then?" Atrus asked.

"Long enough," Hadre answered.

"A hundred years?" Catherine asked, knowing, because she had asked him earlier, that Terahnee's year was not dissimilar to D'ni's.

Hadre laughed at that. "No. My father is almost two hundred years old."

“Ahh…” Catherine met Atrus’s eyes, the faintest flicker of a smile in her own, as if some point had been proven.

A bell rang, deep and low, its tolling seeming to come from the very foundations of the great building. Hearing it, Hadre turned to them and, bowing low, made his apologies.

“Forgive me,” he said, “but I must leave you now. Until this evening…”

Hadre made to leave, then turned back. “Oh…and you will be pleased to learn that we shall be having a special guest at this evening’s entertainment. The district governor will be attending. He had expressed great interest in meeting you.”

And with that he turned and hurried from the room.

“Well…” Catherine said, then fell silent, noticing the servant standing to one side of them. She was sure he had not been there a moment before.

“If you would follow me,” the man said, inclining his head, “I shall show you to your rooms.”

Atrus looked to Catherine, his surprise mirroring her own, then he shrugged. “All right,” he said, glancing once more at the long line of Ro’Jethhe ancestors that filled the walls on every side. “Lead on.”

§

The boat moved swiftly, silently beneath the pearled moon, the land mysteriously veiled in silver light. From where he sat in its prow, Atrus turned and looked back, past Catherine and Hadre, toward the receding whiteness of the house.

He had assumed the evening’s festivities would take place in Ro’Jethhe, but on arriving downstairs at the appointed hour, they were greeted by Hadre with the news that they were all to meet up at the amphitheater, which was to the north of the house.

And so here they were, gliding along through countryside as beautiful as anything they’d seen, the stream, which had broadened to a river, winding gently through the folded hills.

In the stern of the boat, Marrim sat among the young men—Carrad and Irras, Oma and Esel—the same look of wonderment on every face. It

was their habit to talk as they journeyed—to discuss things endlessly—but the beauty of the evening had robbed them all of their tongues.

Atrus looked down, smiling, knowing that he felt no less. He had been here less than a day, yet already he was half in love with this strange and wonderful land. Of all the Ages he had traveled to, none came close to comparing with this, and, not for the first time, he began to wonder who had written such a world; who had crafted the physical characteristics that had permitted such a place to develop—for if he knew anything about writing, it was that, ultimately, geography determined an Age's social structures. He would study the Book even more—surely it was written by a master of masters.

What then had happened here to create such idyllic circumstances? Was it merely the placidity of the weather, the richness of the soil, the unchanging sameness of the place that had allowed such a society to develop? Or were the decisions of men—men like himself—to account for this perfect orderliness, this astonishing flowering of a civilization?

He did not know—nor, to be truthful, did he really wish to. And that in itself was strange, for never before had he felt the edge of his curiosity blunted in this manner. Catherine, too, he knew, was happy to take things as they were, to let the flow of things carry her along.

As now, he thought, conscious of the silent movement of the boat beneath him. As the boat turned a bend in the river, his eyes caught sight of the terraced hillside just ahead of them, the levels of that terrace hollowed out in places and filled with water, so that the whole hillside was a pattern of deep shadow and brilliant, silvered light, forming the silhouette of a face—the face of a beautiful young woman.

There was a murmur of appreciation from the stern of the boat, and then a tiny gasp of surprise, for as the boat moved on, changing direction slightly, so the pattern of light and dark changed. And now the silhouette of a young man was revealed, staring back, as if at the young lady who had so briefly appeared and then vanished once more.

"Ingenious," Atrus said. "Quite ingenious."

"It is an old design," Hadre said, playing down Atrus's praise, "but popular."

"Are there many such designs?" Oma asked.

Hadre turned and smiled at the younger man. "Very many. In fact, you passed some earlier in the day, but they are far less easy to discern in

the glare of daylight."

"And the water…how do you get the water there?" Esel asked, frowning heavily.

But Hadre had turned back to Atrus. "It is not far now, Ro'Atrus," he said. "The amphitheater marks the boundary between our lands and that of our neighbor, Ro'Hedrath. You will meet him, and his son, Juurtyri. Juurtyri, Eedrah, and I shared a tutor when we were younger."

Catherine, who had been sitting quietly throughout, now said, "You mentioned your brother earlier. Will he be there tonight?"

Hadre turned slightly, meeting her eyes. "He has been away, but tonight he will return." Hadre paused. "He has not been well…" Then, smiling, "But come, we are almost there."

§

As the musicians finished, Marrim raised her head and sighed. She had never heard anything like it. At first she had not understood or liked the strangely dissonant sounds with which the composition had begun, nor the oddly mathematical patterns in which it was arranged, yet as it developed and those wonderful harmonies had begun to overlay that basic pattern, she had found herself not merely moved but thrilled by the passionate complexity of the music.

Clever, she thought, then corrected herself. *No, not clever, remarkable.*

So remarkable that, while the music had been playing, she had completely forgotten where she was. And that really was amazing.

When the boat had first entered the amphitheater, gliding beneath a series of low arches, she had smiled, pleased by the way the raised bowl at the center of the amphitheater resembled a giant petal. Yet even as the boat had slowed, following a spiral twist about the center, the walls surrounding the amphitheater had seemed to shimmer and dissolve into a kind of mist. Marrim had stared, not understanding, then had clapped her hands with delight, for the walls had changed in that instant into a continuous waterfall that completely surrounded the amphitheater, the crystal water tumbling into the deep moat that ran around the shell-like structure.

Earlier, discussing things with Oma and Esel, Carrad and Irras, they had agreed among themselves that the wonders that they had witnessed on their travels must have been developed over many, many years. They had imagined a process where someone—some bright, creative sort—had originally had an idea, and how others throughout the land had then copied and developed it, refining it over long centuries until it had reached its present state. Even so, the whole thing was quite incredible. It was not simply that these people put so much thought into everything they did, it was the scale on which they worked. Nothing was too much trouble for them, it seemed.

Now, lounging among the several dozen guests—neighboring landowners and their wives and sons—the idea that some kind of magic lay behind all this was strong in her mind.

"Master Atrus?"

Atrus turned on his couch, looking to her. "Yes, Marrim?"

"Did they have music in D'ni?"

"Yes, but in truth I have never heard it. Besides, it would not compare with what we have just heard."

"You liked our music, Atrus?"

The speaker, on the couch immediately to Atrus's right, was Ro'Jethhe's second son, Eedrah. He was slighter in build than his brother and paler of complexion, yet the resemblance was striking.

Atrus turned and addressed the young man, inclining his head. "To be honest, I have never heard the like."

"Ah, yes," Eedrah pressed, "but did you *like* it?"

To Marrim's surprise, Atrus hesitated, then shook his head. "It was astonishing. So complex and so elegant, but, to be frank, I found it… *uncomfortable*."

Marrim, hearing this, could not help herself. "But it was wonderful, Master Atrus! Those harmonies! The underlying patterns of the music! It was…*beautiful!*"

She looked about her after she had said it and saw how everyone was suddenly looking at her; how all the landowners, all the wives and children of the landowners, were suddenly staring at her, the same concentrated frown on every face. Eedrah, particularly, seemed to be watching her closely. Seeing that, she blushed.

“I agree,” Catherine said, interceding. “For a moment I totally forgot where I was.”

Eedrah smiled. “Why, you are in Terahnee!”

And there was laughter. The young man bowed his head and grinned at Marrim, who blushed deeper. But the moment had passed, and the conversation, which had stopped for the music, began to flow once more.

It was quickly obvious that the people of this Age loved to talk—and not merely to talk, but to debate each subject at great length and in great depth; a natural wit keeping the conversation light and buoyant even when the subject matter was profound.

Marrim, watching Atrus, saw how he suddenly blossomed in this new environment. Admiring him as she did, she had nonetheless thought him somewhat dour, a deep and taciturn man, but suddenly he was transformed, and in the cut and thrust of conversation gave as good as he got from his hosts.

And then, suddenly, the subject turned to D’ni.

“Forgive me, Atrus,” Ro’Jethhe said, “but my son mentioned something about your home. About a place called Ro’D’ni. I must confess, I have never personally heard of such a place.”

Atrus looked about him. “We are, indeed, from D’ni. At least, from a place known as such.”

“I see,” the neighbor, Ro’Hedrath, interjected, “but how did you get here? By boat?”

Again there was laughter but now everyone, it seemed, leaned in, awaiting Atrus’s reply.

“The ruins…” Atrus began.

“Ruins?” Ro’Hedrath looked about him. “I know of no ruins in Terahnee!”

“But surely you must,” Atrus said. “They are but half a day from here.”

At this Ro’Jethhe looked to his second son. “Eedrah, have you read of any such ruins?”

The young man had been looking down. At his father’s query he looked up, startled. “No, Father.”

“There *are* ruins,” Atrus went on. “Up on the plateau. They are screened by trees—huge, ancient trees—but they *are* there. High up. We

came through there."

"Came through?" Ro'Jethhe looked puzzled.

Eedrah stood abruptly. "Forgive me, Father, but I feel…unwell."

"Of course," Ro'Jethhe said, waving his son away. Then, turning, he gestured to one of the stewards to go aid the young man.

Turning back, he smiled. "You must forgive him, Atrus, but he has always been a little…frail."

Atrus opened his mouth, about to answer—to explain just how and why they were there—but at that very moment another boat appeared from beneath the great arch on the far side of the amphitheater, breaching the flow of the falls, water spraying up in a misted arc, and entered the spiral channel, coming to rest at the edge of that central space.

Four men were seated in the body of the boat. One of them—a big, gray-haired man wrapped in jet-black furs—now stood and, stepping from the boat, called a greeting to Ro'Jethhe, who, like all the others, had risen to their feet immediately when the boat appeared.

"Governor!" Ro'Jethhe, said, grinning with pride as he stepped across to greet him. "Welcome to our humble entertainment."

The governor was indeed an imposing figure. He stood head and shoulders above Ro'Jethhe, who was not by any means a small man. Granting Ro'Jethhe a brief smile of acknowledgment, he stepped past him, approaching Atrus's couch.

Atrus had stood, and now, confronted by the man, inclined his head. 'Governor," he said.

"So you are Atrus, of Ro'D'ni."

There was a moment's strangeness—a kind of pause in which anything, it seemed, might happen—and then the governor reached out and took Atrus's hands in a firm grip. "Welcome to Terahnee, Atrus of D'ni."

Relinquishing Atrus's hands, the governor stepped back. "It is rare indeed that we have visitors in this land of ours, so you are truly welcome. I am Horen Ro'Jadre, governor of Ni'Ediren, and I bear a message from the king."

As he spoke the words, the governor drew a sealed scroll from within his cloak and offered it to Atrus. It was a long, impressive cylinder, covered in gold leaf, the great seal of office—an oval lozenge of bright blue wax—appended to it.

Atrus took it, then bowed his head. “I am grateful for your kindness, Horen Ro’Jadre.”

“Think nothing of it,” the governor said; then, turning to address all of them, he announced, “The king has invited Atrus and his party to attend him in the capital. They are to leave tomorrow.” He looked about him. “Where is Eedrah?”

Ro’Jethhe smiled politely. “I am afraid he is unwell.”

“Again? Hmmm…I wanted him to accompany our guests on their journey to the capital.”

“And so he shall,” Ro’Jethhe quickly said. “It is only a momentary indisposition. Eedrah will be honored to accompany them.”

Horen Ro’Jadre smiled. “Good.” He looked about him briefly, then walked across to take the vacant couch at the very center of the amphitheater. As he did, all returned to their couches.

There was a low chime in the air. As it faded, the light in the amphitheater changed as lamps behind the surrounding falls switched on, making the crystalline curtain of water shimmer magically. At the same time a large section of the amphitheater’s floor slid aside and a platform rose from beneath.

Six young men stood on the platform, naked to the waist; perfect physical specimens who bowed, then began a routine of gymnastics that left Marrim mesmerized by their dexterity.

All was going well, when suddenly one of the young men seemed to catch the ankle of another and went tumbling over, falling heavily. He made no sound—indeed, the whole performance had been carried out in silence; a silence broken only by the thud of feet or hands on the platform, the hiss of escaping breath—and even now, as he lay there, grimacing, clearly in pain, he made no sound.

From his couch to the right of Marrim, Ro’Jethhe clapped his hands. At once the performance ended, the platform returned into the floor.

Almost at once the conversation started up again, Ro’Jethhe himself taking the lead, returning to a subject they had been discussing earlier. No mention was made of the performer’s error, nor of D’ni.

They ate, and drank, and later, in a momentary pause in their talk, the governor spoke directly to Atrus once again.

“I am told by friend Ro’Jethhe that some of you wear special glasses in the daylight. May I ask why this is?”

“Of course,” Atrus said. “It is a hereditary aspect of our race. Our eyes are sensitive. The daylight hurts them. And so we wear these lenses.” And with that Atrus took his own lenses from his jacket pocket and, walking across to the governor’s couch, handed them to Horen Ro’Jadre.

The governor studied them a while, fiddling with the silver catch at the side of the lenses, then peered through them, fascinated, it seemed, by the details of their manufacture. Then, smiling pleasantly, he handed them back.

“You will come stay with me, I hope, Atrus. On your way to the capital. It is on your route and I should welcome the chance to talk with you some more.”

“That is…”

“…most kind, I know.” Ro’Jadre laughed. “Oh, kindness has nothing to do with it, my friend. I am curious to know more about you and your fellows.”

“Then we shall be glad to stay. Oh, and governor?”

“Yes, Atrus?”

“Might I send back a messenger, to my own people, to let them know what has transpired.”

“Your people…” The governor blinked. “Of course…yes, of course. You must do so at once. To let them know you are well.”

Atrus bowed. “That is…”

“…most kind.”

And this time both men laughed; their laughter joined by all, guests and locals alike.

“Well,” Ro’Jadre said, looking about him, his face filled with pleasure, “let us continue with the rest of our entertainment. Jethhe Ro’Jethhe, will you begin?”

Their host bowed his head slightly, acknowledging the invitation, then, after a moment’s thought, spoke softly but clearly into the sudden, expectant silence”

“Old, but newly found. Hidden, yet in full sight. A newly hatched egg with an old cracked shell…”

And Marrim, looking about her, found herself amazed once more. *Riddles,* she thought. *They’re playing riddles!*

§

The journey back was merry. They had drunk far too much—even the normally sober Atrus—and enjoyed themselves far more than any of them had anticipated.

"That was just *so* clever," Oma said, leaning heavily against his friend Esel. "That one about the bird and the lock with the silver pick. How they think them up I'll never know!"

He grinned and looked about him, then, seeing Hadre at the prow, put his hand to his mouth, acknowledging his gaffe, but the young man seemed not to mind.

"We play riddles from our earliest days," Hadre said. "As I said before, we love the things of the mind. Mental games and memory tests—we delight in all such challenges. They keep one sharp and alert."

"Then you are to be applauded for it," Oma said, making a pretend toast in the air. "For myself, I would surely die of indolence, living as you do."

"I am sure that is not so," Hadre said, sounding more sober than any of them. "I saw you at the library, Oma. I saw how you drank in the sight of all those books. If you want, you can take one or two of them to read on the journey to the capital."

Oma, overwhelmed by the offer, stood and bowed at the waist, bringing ripples of laughter from the others, but Hadre merely returned the bow.

"You are…"

"…*most welcome!*" the five youngsters answered as one, then laughed; a laughter that Hadre joined in with after a moment. A laughter that filled the warm night air as the boat glided slowly, silently beneath the waning moon, toward the distant, shimmering whiteness of Ro'Jethhe.

§

They met again the next morning, in the great book-lined study belonging to Ro'Jethhe. The governor was to leave within the hour and had asked to see Atrus again before he departed.

"Forgive me for summoning you so early," Horen Ro'Jadre said, coming across to take Atrus's hands as he entered the room, "but I wished to speak with you informally before this evening."

Atrus smiled. "Then speak. I am listening."

Ro'Jadre nodded, then, releasing Atrus's hands, said, "I enjoyed your company greatly last night, Atrus, and I know you will make a great impression at court, but I felt I should warn you of one thing."

"Warn me? Of what?"

"Of saying too much of who and what you are. Of D'ni and the like."

Atrus narrowed his eyes. "Why so?"

"Because it is not our place to ask such things of you. You understand?"

"I'm afraid I do not. You *are* governor here, are you not?"

"Governor, yes, but not king."

"And it is for the king alone to ask such questions?"

Horen Ro'Jadre beamed. "There. I told Ro'Jethhe you would understand."

"But…" Atrus fell silent, then. "It is your way, I take it?"

"Exactly. The moment the king agreed to see you, it was decided. It would be wrong for any one of us to know more than he."

"I see."

"Then we shall meet again this evening. Until then…"

He stepped forward, embracing Atrus briefly, then was gone.

Atrus stared after him a moment, then turned back, looking to Ro'Jethhe, as if for explanation, but all the elder said was, "The king has agreed to see you, Atrus. It is an immense honor."

"Yes," Atrus said. Then, understanding that Ro'Jethhe wished him nothing but good, he smiled. "I shall not forget your kindness, Jethhe Ro'Jethhe."

The old man beamed. "Look after my son, Atrus. And return here when you can. And remember, my door is always open to you, so long as you are in Terahnee."

§

“Interesting,” Catherine said later, when he told her about the meeting with the governor.

“All peoples have their customs,” Atrus said, buckling the strap on his knapsack. “Now…where has young Irras got to?”

“I’m here, Master Atrus,” Irras said, coming into the room.

“You know what you have to say to Master Tamon?”

Irras nodded. “I have it by heart.”

“Then go at once. And return here once the message has been delivered. Jethhe Ro’Jethhe will not mind if you stay until we return from the capital.”

Irras bowed his head, then, with a curt, “Take care,” he turned on his heel and vanished.

Atrus looked to Catherine, a query in his eyes.

“I think, perhaps, he’s disappointed about not coming to the capital with us,” she said.

“But that decision was not in my hands.”

“It makes it no easier for him, Atrus. Irras was excited at the thought of seeing the great city, and now he must be content to be a runner between here and the plateau. It must have been a great blow to him.”

“And yet he says nothing.”

Catherine smiled. “So you have taught them Atrus.”

Atrus frowned. “Yes, but we ought to make it up to him. I could ask the King if Irras could come on after us.”

“You’ll ask the king?”

“Of course,” Atrus said, unaware of the smile on Catherine’s lips. But she did not pursue the matter.

“Are you ready?” Atrus asked, looking about him, checking for the last time that he had everything he wished to take with him.

“Ready,” she said.

“Good. Then let us go down and meet with Eedrah. It is time we got under way.”

§

The youngsters had packed already and, while Atrus and Catherine went to see Ro'Jethhe and the governor, they decided to explore the grounds.

A narrow, elegant footbridge led over the stream by which they had entered the house, opening out onto a path of colored stone that meandered across a neatly swept lawn to disappear among the rocks of a grotto.

They followed the path, through the rocks and up, emerging on the far side on a ledge overlooking a series of long, barnlike buildings with low, red-tiled roofs.

Several of the cloaked servants were down there, talking among themselves, but noticing the young people up on the ledge, they fell silent and dispersed, one of them heading directly toward them.

He stopped at the foot of the steps that led down from the ledge. "Can I help you, Masters?"

"Thank you, but no," Carrad said. "We shall be leaving soon, and we merely wished to look around before we left."

The man bowed. "Then let me be your guide. I am Tyluu."

"And what do you do, Tyluu?" Esel asked, beginning to descend the steps.

The man kept his head bowed the slightest fraction as he answered. "I coordinate the harvest." He paused. "Would you like to see the grain stores?"

They went down and, with Tyluu as their guide, walked through the great storehouses, impressed by what they saw—especially the two young Averonese, who, coming from a farming world themselves, appreciated just how much work must have gone into this. The great barns themselves were deceptive, for they went down into the earth some way. They had glimpses of great stone stairways that snaked down into the depths, and Tyluu explained that much, apart from grain, was stored in the lower levels.

They walked on, out into great pens where herds of strangely docile beasts milled quietly, their moist dark eyes following the four guess as they passed by.

All was neat and orderly. Not a fence was broken, not a farming implement out of place. Oma commented on this, and Tyluu bowed, as if

some great compliment had been made, and answered, “It is our way.”

Here and there, Marrim noticed, there were what looked like wells. Deep, square holes in the ground with borders of finished stone. She glanced down one as she passed and thought she saw some small animal scuttle by beneath.

And then it was time to return. Oma thanked Tyluu, but Tyluu merely bowed and backed away, merging with the shadows.

Carrad frowned.

“It is their way,” Marrim said, grinning at him. Then, “Come on, let’s get back.”

§

As they journeyed north of Ro’Jethhe the ground began to rise, the canal winding its way through small, undulating foothills. Once more the countryside was beautiful and there were endless wonders to be seen to either side of the boat. Then, after an hour, they came to the first of a series of locks—huge, elaborately decorated marble halls into which the boat sailed, the end doors closing behind them.

Lamps in the ceiling cast a dazzling light over them as, beneath the flattened hull of the boat, the water suddenly rose, lifting them up onto another level of the “hill,” into which they quietly sailed, the daylight up ahead of them once more.

And then out, into a landscape transformed—the hills to all sides of them covered in a thousand different kinds of flowers, while directly ahead lay a strange, emerald-colored structure that seemed almost to explode from the earth.

At first they thought this was the house to which they were heading, but Eedrah quickly set them right.

“That is an antilogy.”

“An antilogy?” Atrus queried. “A contradiction in terms?”

“Precisely,” Eedrah said.

Moment by moment the boat sailed closer to the strange building, their path leading them slowly around the structure, revealing more aspects of it at every moment.

“Eedrah smiled. “What is more dynamic than the moment in which a raindrop hits the surface of a lake, and what more thrilling than to freeze that moment and capture it forever; to transform something that was brief and transient into an eternal statement?”

“And is that what it is?” Esel asked. “A raindrop hitting the surface of a lake?”

“Can you not see it?” Eedrah asked.

And indeed, now that they knew what to look for, they could. They could see the rounded shape of it, the depression at the center the way the edges of the water drop exploded outward, almost like flames, obeying eternal laws of physics.

Eedrah’s smile broadened. “Every district boasts three or four of them. And it is said the king owns a great park containing some of the finest in the land.”

Esel, who had been staring at the structure, wide-eyed, now looked back at Eedrah. “Perhaps we shall be fortunate enough to see them.”

“Perhaps…but look, through the gap in the hills there…that is where we are headed. *That* is Ro’Jadre.”

§

A great hill of marble faced them, tier upon tier climbing through the hills like the steps of giants. And set into the lowest of those steps, a great ring of blood-red stone that seemed to flicker, as if flames burned within its cool outer casing.

That ring surrounded a tunnel. They headed directly toward it now, across a long, high viaduct that stretched out, its attenuated arches elegantly spanning a gaping chasm.

Inside the tunnel, the door boomed shut behind them and once more the water rose with a great rush, lifting them up and up and up, through a series of locks until they emerged at the top of that great hill of marble, in a massive square pool, huge, tiered walls surrounding them on every side, one side of which glowed in the sun’s rays.

And there, standing on a great balcony in the sunlight, was Horen Ro’Jadre himself, wearing a pale cream flowing gown. He stood out, a tall,

proud figure, his dark hair combed back severely from his head. Raising his arm he smiled down at them.

"Atrus! Catherine! Welcome to Ro'Jadre!"

§

The house of Ro'Jethhe had been impressive, but Ro'Jadre's house was simply astonishing. The entrance hall alone, with its sweeping stairways and magnificent windows, was enough to take the breath, and the party from D'ni stood there, as Ro'Jadre came down to greet them, quite in awe of their surroundings.

Marrim watched Horen Ro'Jadre embrace Atrus, conscious of a change in him since the previous evening. Then the governor had seemed stern and distant even when he smiled or laughed, but today he seemed more at ease, much more relaxed in his own home.

If one could call something this palatial "home."

"I am so pleased to see you all once more," Ro'Jadre said, looking about him, including them all in his smile of welcome. Nearby stood two servants, in attendance, their heads inclined, their distinctive look—wine-red cloaks and wire-fine silver hair—familiar now.

"You must be hungry," Ro'Jadre went on. "There are some light refreshments in the lower gallery. If you would come with me."

They followed him through, into a long, low room, the light of which was completely different from outside, a faint, roseate glow that seemed to be frozen perpetually in that first, hopeful moment of the dawn. Marrim looked about her, trying to see how this was done—by lamps, or filters at the windows—but try as she might, she could not discern the source of it.

Miracles, she thought, taking a couch. Terahnee was indeed a land of miracles.

The journey had not been long, but the air here seemed to feed the appetite, such that Marrim ate voraciously, surprised to find herself so hungry. Ro'Jadre's "light refreshment" would on any other world have seemed a feast, but Marrim, along with the others, was beginning to get used to this level of casual opulence.

As for Horen Ro'Jadre, he watched them silently, picking at this and that, letting his guests eat and drink their fill. Only then, when he saw that most were satisfied, did he look to Atrus, and, smiling, say:

"I understand you are fond of books, Atrus."

"Very fond. They are the lifeblood of a culture."

"Indeed," Ro'Jadre said, nodding gravely. "I also understand that you wish to know more about this land of ours."

Atrus glanced at Eedrah, who was looking down. "That is so. I hoped to learn something of its history and development."

"Its history…" There was a strange movement in Ro'Jadre's face. "You mean you wish to know the names of its kings?"

"I…" Atrus paused, then. "Surely things have not always been like this?"

Ro'Jadre smiled genially. "I am sure that is the case."

"Then there will be books, perhaps, that talk of how things once were."

"Maybe," Ro'Jadre said, with an uncharacteristic vagueness. He turned and snapped his fingers. At once one of the servants turned and vanished through the doorway.

Atrus, sensing some kind of awkwardness concerning the matter, let it drop. "Tell me, Governor," he said, "how long will it take us to reach the capital?"

"Three days," Ro'Jadre answered, reaching across to pluck a small black, oval fruit from one of the bowls. "But tonight you will stay here, as my guests. Before then, however, let me show you my house."

He stood. "You asked me about history, Atrus. Well, this house has stood here, much as it is now, for close on four thousand years. And before then there was another house, and before that…" Ro'Jadre shrugged.

Four thousand years…Catherine looked about her at the effortless elegance of the room. Unlike D'ni, which *felt* ancient, the very stones worn down beneath one's tread, this place seemed newly built. Not a speck of dust met the eye, not a single sign of aging.

Frozen in time, she thought, as she swung round and put her feet down onto the floor. Yet looking at these people, they seemed unaffected by that. There was nothing jaded about them; nothing to suggest that they lived their lives unchangingly. And as Atrus himself had commented, they were as agile of mind as the most learned Guildsman.

“Come,” Ro’Jadre said, leading them between the dark blue pillars and out into a high-ceilinged atrium, “let me show you where I work.”

§

Esel and Oma stood together at the center of the great workroom and slowly shook their heads in amazement. They had never seen a room like this—never guessed that such a room could even possibly exist, but here it was. Ro’Jadre called it his “laboratory,” yet, with its various balconies and levels, its side-chambers and raised sections, accessible by narrow stairways, it was more like a whole Guild House in itself. Great racks of chemicals filled one wall, while another had endless cupboards of equipment. And there were books, endless books, everywhere one looked, not to talk of the workbenches and the scientific apparatus, much of which the two D’ni did not recognize.

And everything gleamed, as if newly polished. Even the air seemed clean.

“Astonishing,” Esel said quietly, while beside him Oma simply stared.

“You are welcome to use it whenever you wish,” Ro’Jadre said, with that same open hospitality they had come to believe was universal in Terahnee. “What is mine is yours.”

Atrus gave a little bow. Then curious, he asked, “What are your own interests, Governor Ro’Jadre?”

“My interests?”

“Scientifically speaking…”

“Ah…” Ro’Jadre walked across and, reaching over one of the benches, took down a massive-looking ledger and opened it, turning it so that Atrus, who had followed him across, could see.

“I’m afraid…” Atrus began, but Ro’Jadre understood at once.

“The script…of course. It differs from your own, I understand. Well, what you see are my experiment notes.” He flicked back a few pages and indicated several diagrams, beside which were columns of figures and, on the page facing it, three beautifully drawn graphs. “I have been experimenting on inks. Following up an idea I had.”

Atrus stared at the pages, clearly fascinated, despite the difficulty of reading the Terahnee script. It was not *so* different when one concentrated.

"But enough of that," Ro'Jadre said, leaving the book where it lay. "Come, let me show you the long gallery. There are things there from the Ages—grotesque and beautiful things—you will not have seen before."

Oma and Esel stood there a moment, reluctant to move on, a look that was almost longing in their eyes. Then, glancing about them as they went, they followed Ro'Jadre out through the marble doorway.

§

It was another hour before one of the stewards showed them to their suite of rooms, high up on the east side of the great house. As Atrus stepped into the spacious apartment, it was to be met by the sight of four beautiful old books, their covers a deep, burnished yellow trimmed with black, laid out on the massive desk that filled one corner of the main room.

Atrus walked across and opened the first of the volumes. As yet he could not read the strange variant script, but he knew, without having to ask, that these were the books of Terahnee history Ro'Jadre had promised him.

The evening had been wonderful. There had been music and dancing, and games—associative and rhyming—and any number of other clever things; things that they had never imagined. His mind reeled when he thought of all the things they had witnessed. The sounds, the tastes, the sights…

"Do you still think these people are not D'ni?" Catherine asked, coming alongside him. "After all you've seen? They speak a dialect very close to D'ni. And they write Ages, exactly like the D'ni."

Atrus smiled. "I concede that the likelihood of them being related to the D'ni is great. But I am certain that the truth is here, in these pages. I shall have Oma and Esel begin work on them at once."

Catherine was quiet a moment, then she asked, "Does it not make you wonder, Atrus?"

"Wonder?"

“Oh, it’s just that I keep thinking about what Master Tergahn said. About the reason why this Age was linked to D’ni. For all this to exist and for the D’ni to know nothing of it…that seems…”

“Incredible?”

“Yes. And yet the Books were left there to be a link between the Ages. Why should that be?”

“Different paths,” Atrus mused.

“Yes, but why?”

Atrus smiled and gently tapped the open page. “The answer’s here, I warrant.” Then, closing the book, he went over to the door and threw it open. “Oma! Esel! Come! I have a task for you!”

§

Eedrah called for them before the entertainment that evening.

“We can call for the others on our way,” he began, as he stepped into the room, then stopped dead, seeing Oma and Esel seated at the great desk in the corner, Marrim and Irras talking with them animatedly.

“The histories,” Atrus explained. “We have been busy learning something of your world.”

“Something and nothing,” Eedrah said, then, smiling, went on, “As the prophecies say, ‘Through such tiny cracks the past seeps through to the present.’ “

Catherine stared at Eedrah, surprised. “You’ve *heard* of the prophecies here in Terahnee?”

“Rumors and old wives’ tales, mainly. But there are those in the city who have spent a lifetime studying such things. Great scholars who fill their lives searching through ancient books to find some snippet here, some snippet there.”

Catherine looked to Atrus, but Atrus seemed uninterested. He had wandered over to the desk again, where Oma was quietly but insistently making a point about a line of text he had translated. For a moment she hesitated, then asked, “Would it be possible to arrange a meeting with one of these…scholars?”

Eedrah shrugged. “I guess so. I don’t see the harm in asking. And it’s said these scholars love to talk of what they know.”

Catherine smiled. “You seem a race of scholars, Eedrah.”

“And so we are. But come…the governor awaits us. I understand he has arranged a very special entertainment in your honor.”

Atrus turned back at this news. “Then we shall leave the books for now. Come, Oma, Esel. There will be time for that on our journey. Our host awaits us.”

§

The governor stood before the door, a faintly amused smile on his face. It was, even by normal standards, a small door, barely large enough for a young child to pass through.

“Who will be first?” Ro’Jadre asked, looking from one to another of his guests. “You, Atrus? Or maybe you, young Marrim?”

Marrim glanced at Atrus, then nodded. “You say that once inside I must choose within thirty seconds or all of the doors close?”

“That is correct,” Ro’Jadre answered. “Sometimes there are two choices, sometimes three. Sometimes you will have to climb, sometimes you will need to descend, but always…*always* you have only thirty seconds to do so.”

“And at the end of it?” Catherine asked.

“You will see. So, Marrim, are you ready?”

“I am.”

“Then go through. We shall see you again…sooner or later.”

Marrim did not quite like the sound of that, but she was committed now. Putting her hand against the door, she pushed, then stepped inside, into a room that was no bigger than a cell. As the door closed behind her, she noted the doors to her left and right, but she had already decided. She would go straight as far as she could go. Two paces took her to the second door. She pushed it open and stepped through.

This room was longer, thinner, the ceiling higher. There was a door in the ceiling but no doorway to her right. Yet even as she took a step toward the facing door, the floor beneath her seemed to move—to turn, though how it could turn she did not know. There were faint noises in the walls. Feeling slightly dizzy, she made her way across to the door facing

her. Or was it the left hand door now? She double-checked, the counting in her head warning her that fifteen seconds had already passed.

Straight ahead, she told herself, pushing the door open. But what if the room *had* turned? Was she still heading in a straight line?

This room—the third room—was circular. Not two but five different doors led off. And there, in the center of the floor, was an opening. A chute of some kind? She went across and stared straight down. Dare she go down there?

An entertainment, she told herself, reminding herself of what Horen Ro'Jadre had said. *It's only an entertainment.*

Marrim eased herself over the lip and slid, down, down into darkness, then felt the chute turn and straighten.

How far had she descended? Twenty feet? More? She got to her feet and walked forward, her hand outstretched before her.

Her hand met the flat, smooth surface of a door. She pushed.

And stepped out into daylight.

No, she thought, *impossible*. For now she seemed to be at the top of the building, the sunlight coming down through a clear glass roof.

Two doors and thirty seconds to choose. Left or right? For there was no door facing her in this room.

Besides, that plan had been abandoned. So what now? What alternate strategy did she use to get herself through this maze of rooms?

Guesswork…

She went left, into what seemed to be a corridor, a single door at the end of it, another exit—a square hole without a covering hatch—in the center of the ceiling. Yet even as she walked toward the door at the far end, the room seemed to turn yet again beneath her.

And this time, she knew she was not imagining it. The rooms were moving all the while. Or maybe not all the while, but sometimes—perhaps when she made a certain choice.

But there was no more time to think. Reaching up with both hands, Marrim pulled herself up into the dark.

Or almost darkness, for there was light—a big square patch of light—some way ahead of her, yes, and another just behind.

Another choice.

She turned 180 degrees, and as she did she began to mentally retrace her steps, for in that instant she had understood. It was not

necessarily the choice you made, it was the remembering. Her first instinct had been correct—she was certain of it now. The quickest way was to go straight ahead.

For a time there was nothing but rooms—fifty, maybe eighty rooms on who knew how many levels—and then, stepping through a door, Marrim came out into a huge, sunlit dome, beneath the transparent roof of which was a massive water garden, with streams and islands and bridges and, at the very center of all, a huge pagodalike structure in what looked like pearl, beneath the sloping roofs of which was a circle of chairs, most of which were filled by guests.

Seeing her, Ro'Jadre stood and came to the rail, looking across to where she stood. "Well done, young Marrim," he called. "That was quick indeed. Why, I have known guests lost in there for days on end."

Marrim blinked, wondering if she was being ribbed, then asked, "And what would happen to them?"

"Oh, we would send someone in to bring them out. Eventually. But do not fear, Marrim, we would not have let you languish in there too long. Nor any of your party." He smiled, gesturing for her to come across the bridge. "But tell me, how did you manage to work it out?"

§

Atrus, who had been last to enter the maze, was the second to emerge, less than five minutes after Marrim.

Stepping into the first room, he had had no real expectations of the experience. A maze was, after all, only a maze. Yet as the rooms had begun to turn and he had got deeper in, he had begun to enjoy it, until, at the last, he had found a real delight in working out the puzzle.

It had been like tunneling through the rock, and after a moment all manner of memories had come flooding back and he had seen his father's face clearly for the first time in many years.

A maze of moving rooms. *Ingenious*…

He had said the word aloud, unaware that he had done so.

"I am glad you think so," Ro'Jadre said, coming across the bridge toward him. "I was telling Marrim. It is never the same twice. For each traveler, the maze is entirely different."

Atrus frowned. “How, then, is it done?”

“Oh, the rules of manipulation were set centuries ago. We but perfect an ancient art. But, sad to say, the days of the great maze-makers are long past. There has not been an original new maze for many years. At least, none I have heard of.”

“And those rules…they determine which rooms move and which do not?”

“That is so. Though not all the rooms *can* move. Like any building, the maze must have structural integrity. But within that rigid framework there is a great deal of flexibility. More than you can possibly imagine. If it were not so, then the maze would soon lose its power to fascinate.”

“Do you ever play the maze yourself, Ro’Jadre?”

Ro’Jadre smiled. “Very seldom these days. I am not as sprightly as I was. But the young people are very fond of it, particularly when the choosing time is shortened.”

“Shortened?”

“To ten, sometimes even five seconds.”

Atrus nodded, imagining it. To have to negotiate the maze under such circumstances—to have to run and clamber and slide like a hunted animal, afraid of being trapped—that would be a game of considerable skill, especially when one also had to attempt to keep the ever-changing map of the maze in one’s mind at all times.

It was ten minutes before Catherine emerged. Another fifteen and Esel stumbled from the door, looking flustered, his dark eyebrows formed into a heavy frown. Last to appear, almost two hours after Marrim had first emerged, was Oma, who had a dazed and slightly startled look about him.

“Everything was fine until the rooms started moving,” he said as he took the last vacant chair. “After that…” He shook his head.

“And yet none of you were trapped, and none took more than two and a half hours,” Ro’Jadre said. “That *is* impressive, particularly when none of you had ever played the game before.”

Marrim leaned across, whispering something to Atrus. Atrus considered a moment, then nodded.

“Ro’Jadre,” he said. “My young companion would like to run the maze again.”

“Again?”

“Yes, but this time with a ten-second choosing time.”

Ro’Jadre laughed. “Why, certainly. But why not add some spice to the entertainment? Why not make the game a race this time? Young Marrim against one of our young people.”

The governor turned, looking about him, his eyes falling on the lounging figure of Eedrah.

“Eedrah Ro’Jethhe…will you not take up the challenge?”

Eedrah, who had until that moment been picking at a bowl of fruit in a desultory fashion, now looked up, startled by Ro’Jadre’s words. He looked about him, as if trying to figure out some way of escaping the invitation, then, somewhat reluctantly, he nodded.

“Good,” Ro’Jadre said, a satisfied smile lighting his lips. “If the two young people would prepare themselves.”

As Eedrah and Marrim stood, Eedrah glanced across at her—a strangely awkward look. “Governor Ro’Jadre,” he said, “can we not make it fifteen seconds? I fear our guest might find it…overstrenuous.”

Ro’Jadre looked to Marrim and raised an eyebrow, but Marrim said nothing.

“Twelve seconds,” Ro’Jadre said decisively. He clapped his hands and at once two stewards appeared at his side. “Tuure,” he said, addressing one of them, “escort the young people to the maze.”

Then, turning back, he looked to Atrus and smiled. “And afterward I shall talk to you of the king, and of what you might expect when you reach the capital.”

§

Twice she stepped into a room to find Eedrah there already. Twice he stared back at her, startled, then moved on.

Relentlessly, Marrim moved from room to room, as floors turned and the great maze fitted itself into new configurations. And all the while, in her head, she counted. Counted the seconds. Counted how many forward or back, up or down she was. For the secret, she understood now, was mathematical—was pluses and minuses. It was no good thinking in terms of direction. One had to strip that away and think pure numbers, otherwise you were lost.

What she hadn’t expected, however, were the pure physical demands of that twelve-second limit. It gave you barely enough time to look about a room and choose, let alone climb up—if climbing up was what you wished to do. But suddenly, almost before she expected it, she was outside again, standing there in the great dome, the water gardens all about her.

“Well done…”

She turned, to find Eedrah there behind her. “Oh,” she said. “I didn’t see you.”

“That’s because I wasn’t there. Until now.”

“Then I won?”

Eedrah nodded, but there was a strange sorrow in his face that she did not understand.

“Well done!” Ro’Jadre boomed out from where he stood at the rail, Atrus beside him. “You have a real talent for it, Marrim!”

Marrim inclined her head, accepting the governor’s praise, but she was more concerned with Eedrah.

“Eedrah?” she asked quietly. But Eedrah simply walked away, hurrying across the bridge.

§

“There, Atrus,” Ro’Jadre said, handing Atrus the head-and-shoulders portrait. “That is Ro’Eh Ro’Dan, king of Terahnee.”

Atrus studied the painting, conscious of Catherine standing at his shoulder, then nodded.

Ro’Eh Ro’Dan was a young, immensely handsome man with refined facial features and pleasant, intelligent eyes. Looking at that face, staring into those clear, trustworthy eyes, Atrus found himself convinced that he should link his own people’s fate with the fate of these people.

He looked up, his eyes taking in the luxuriousness of his surroundings. Beside this, D’ni was as nothing. All of his schemes to rebuild D’ni seemed futile now that he had seen Terahnee.

Yet as he handed back the portrait, Atrus kept his thoughts much to himself. “He looks a fine man,” he said.

“And young,” Ro’Jadre said, taking his turn to stare at the painting. “He is not yet one hundred, but strong, and a good writer, so it is said.”

“A writer?” Yet that fact did not surprise Atrus. He looked to Catherine and saw at once that she was watching him, an understanding in her eyes. “Then we shall have much to talk about.”

Ro’Jadre smiled, then set the portrait down. “Oh, of that I have no doubt. No doubt at all.”

PART FIVE

DISCORDANT TIME. THE SMALLEST OF

ENEMIES UN-MANS THEM ALL.

HIDDEN WITHIN THE HIDDEN.

A BREATH AND THEN DARKNESS.

--FROM THE KOROKH JIMAH

VV. 4302-3

From where he sat in the stern of the Governor’s boat, Atrus looked out across a land of unending luxury; of glades and winding streams, of magical conceits and beautiful falls of floral color. And greenness. Everywhere one looked, a lush green perfection of growing things.

The silken awning above him rustled gently in the breeze, and for a moment he found himself almost dozing in the warm, late afternoon air. A bird called across the meadows, a piping call, while the boat glided on as in a dream.

It was the end of their third day in Terahnee, and the city now dominated the skyline ahead of them, the sun slowly setting behind its towering walls. In an hour or less they would stop for the night, at the

house of another landowner—this one a friend of Ro'Jethhe's named Tanaren Ro'Tanaren.

For this once there would be no feast, no entertainment, and Atrus for one was pleased at that. They had stopped earlier, in a glade, to eat and drink—a pleasant wine that even Atrus had sampled. Which was why now he felt so relaxed.

And happy.

The thought made him stir and wake. He looked about him at the little group in the boat and realized that each of them, like he, was smiling, each one in his or her own little reverie, relaxed after being tense for so long.

And with that thought came another. That they had worked so hard, so long that they deserved this tiny break from their labors; deserved this drifting, effortless journey with its unceasing delights. Things had been hard back in D'ni, there was no mistaking that. But this…

He had not even dared to dream that anything like this existed.

Catherine, sensing his sudden wakefulness, turned her head to him and quietly spoke. "Atrus?"

But there was nothing that he wished to say. Not now. Last night he had slept the sleep of children—that deep, untroubled sleep that rarely comes when one is older. And this morning he had awakened refreshed in spirit and confirmed in what he had decided the night before—to petition the king of Terahnee and bring his people through, to settle here in this wonderful place.

This place of eternal summers.

Catherine reached out and took his hand, holding it lightly as she looked out across the beauty of the surrounding land.

No, he did not even have to ask her. He could see it in her face. In all their faces. Why have D'ni when they could have this? And surely there must be space for them here in this endless, rolling landscape?

He sighed, content to let the thought drift from him, like a leaf on a stream.

Simply to be here was enough. And, yawning, Atrus stretched, his body totally relaxed for the first time in so long he could not recall when he had last felt like this.

§

Tanaren Ro'Tanaren turned out to be a genial, pleasant man. As they stepped down from the boat he greeted them warmly, embracing each of them in turn before leading them inside.

Imposing as it was, Ro'Tanaren's house had a totally different feel to it than those they had previously visited. It was somehow brighter, airier, such that even as the evening descended, the soft lighting in the house made it seem that day lingered slightly longer there.

As ever, Ro'Tanaren was the very model of a host, and after a brief exchange about their journey, they were ushered to their rooms to rest.

"We can talk later," Ro'Tanaren said, smiling. "Now rest. You have traveled far today."

Alone in their rooms, Atrus wondered if he should broach the subject of bringing the survivors over from D'ni with Catherine, but it was she who spoke first. She was standing by the open window, looking out across the stepped lawns.

"Have you noticed," she said, "how in all our time here we have never seen a kitchen? Never seen a single plate brought or cleared away. It's as if the stewards supervise the air."

Atrus laughed quietly. "To be perfectly honest, Catherine, I hadn't really thought about it. But no. I guess it is their way."

"Etiquette, you mean?"

He nodded, then went across to her. "I wanted to ask you something."

She turned, meeting his eyes, then smiled. "You want to bring the D'ni here, right?"

"And those from Averone."

That surprised her. She thought for a moment, then gave a little nod. "I see. You want to close the link."

"Exactly."

Catherine took a long, slow breath. "I agree."

"We cannot let what happened to D'ni happen here," he went on. "You've seen this place. To think of it suffering the same fate. No. We must throw in our lot with these people. I will petition Ro'Eh Ro'Dan when I see him."

“And if the Averonese do not wish to come?”

“Then they can stay. But the Book must be destroyed, the Temple sealed.”

§

They journeyed on into the heart of Terahnee, and everyday the city grew, the sheer scale of that gargantuan edifice finally imposing itself upon Atrus’s imagination, making him understand that what he had glimpsed from the plateau was not, after all, the capital, but merely one of its outlying districts, for beyond that great wall of buildings another larger wall seemed to climb to the heavens, such that the whole of D’ni could have been placed in a tiny hole in its side. It was like a mountain, only this mountain had been built, stone upon stone, so Eedrah said. And the histories, which gave clue to little else, at least confirmed that much. A thousand years of building had produced that magnificent pile.

The nearer they came to it, the grander everything seemed to be. The locks that raised them up or lowered them down were bigger, the canal itself much broader. Fields gave way to parks. Great houses lay on every side of them now, some so impressive that they seemed the palaces of kings. Yet these were ordinary citizens. Boats were moored alongside the canal now, and sometimes partying groups of people would hail them and call out greetings.

Finally, in the midst of that great sprawl of wondrous buildings, they came to a junction of several waterways and entered a massive curving channel—the King’s Cut, they were told it was called—which carved its deep blue furrow through broad avenues of beautiful mansions lined with the most extraordinary trees they had yet seen in all of Terahnee, the night-black scented leaves drifting down on them as they passed, while ahead of them the city climbed to the sky.

Atrus stared wide-eyed, his neck craned back, and still it seemed he could not see the top. He turned, looking to Eedrah and asked, “How do we get up there? Or is that the way we are going?”

“That is indeed our way,” Eedrah said, “and the boat will take us there.” he grinned. “Have patience, Atrus, and you will see.”

The walls of the channel grew slowly higher and higher on both sides, with here and there a massive wooden gate set deep into the smooth-carved stone.

Coming around the next turn, Atrus noticed a faint rippling up ahead, a sharp line of turbulence drawn straight across the placid water-course, like a weir. As they passed over it, Atrus turned to look, even as a wall pushed up out of the water behind them, closing off the channel.

At once they were lifted up on a great tide of water, the boat's pace accelerating with the rush of the incoming water, then slowing as the walls began to grow once more to either side.

Time and again this happened. Time and again they were lifted and the boat rushed forward. And then, suddenly, the walls dropped away and they were out in the open, high up on a massive aqueduct, the avenues of the capital spread out below them like a map, while directly ahead, across an artificial chasm at least a mile wide, was the king's palace, its towering ramparts piercing the blue sky.

Seeing it, Atrus felt in awe of the power that had built this place; in awe of the men who had planned and carried out such a mighty scheme. Nor was it the sheer bulk of the edifice that took the breath, it was the delicate working of the stone, the careful balance between size and elegance. It had a natural, flowing look, yet nothing in nature could have made so beautiful a structure.

Atrus glanced across and saw that Eedrah, too, was awed—saw by his parted lips, his astonished eyes, that this son of Terahnee had never, until that moment, guessed at the splendor at the center of it all.

Slowly they drifted toward that massive work of stone, then passed into its shadow, the towering entrance arch swallowing up their tiny craft.

They passed inside, into a cavernous hall, the floor a single sapphire pool, the ceiling echoing high above them, not a single pillar supporting that huge mass of stone. But Atrus barely had time to consider that a wonder when, coming to the center of that hall, the boat was lifted on a column of water toward the ceiling.

There was a moment's shock and fear as they sped toward it, and then the stone parted with a silent rush and they were through, into a great vertical shaft, the walls studded with lamps, the great column of water falling away into the dark beneath.

Up and up they went, and then, even as the wonder of it began to fade, they burst through into a chamber even larger than that from which they had come, tier after tier of benches reaching up on every side, those benches filled with thousands of lavishly dressed men and women. And there, facing them, on a massive throne of cut emerald, a flight of fifty golden steps leading up to him, sat the young king, Ro'Eh Ro'Dan.

He stood up and stepped out onto the top step, smiling broadly, his deep, rich voice filling that chamber.

"Welcome, Atrus of D'ni. I hope your journey was a pleasant one."

§

Catherine watched from the foot of the steps as Atrus climbed to meet the king, greeting Ro'Eh Ro'Dan, who had come precisely halfway down that golden flight, the two men grasping each other's hands warmly.

The portrait had not lied. Ro'Eh Ro'Dan was a handsome man with sparkling blue eyes and an air of immeasurable authority. Even so, he seemed genuinely pleased to meet with Atrus and greeted him as one might greet a long-lost brother or the son of a favorite uncle. There was no coldness in that greeting, no distance, and that more than anything reassured her.

"Well, Atrus," the king said, standing back a little, his voice raised so that all in that great chamber might hear, "do you like our land of Terahnee?"

"It is a land of wonders," Atrus answered, smiling at the other man. "And your people have been most kind. We could not have asked for better treatment."

Ro'Eh Ro'Dan grinned broadly. "That is good. But we must show you the full richness of Terahnee hospitality. Tonight you will be our special guests at a grand feast, and you will tell me then of D'ni."

"You have heard of D'ni, then, King Ro'Eh Ro'Dan?"

"Not before four days ago. But now I feel I know it well. Or as well as any scholar in my land."

"Then it is known to you in your books?"

Ro'Eh Ro'Dan laughed. "Mentions of your land are rare, Atrus. It was some while ago, it seems, since last our lands had congress. But I have

had my scholars scour the great libraries of the capital and they have discovered several references to D'ni."

"Then there *is* a link?"

"Do you mean, are we cousins?" Ro'Eh Ro'Dan grinned once again. "It would certainly seem so. The language, the fact that we both write Books. Both facts speak eloquently for a distant split between your people and mine, Atrus. For what reason, who knows—we cannot fathom it from the ancient books—but now that breach is healed. Those who were parted now have come together. And I am glad it is so. Most glad indeed."

§

It was late when they finally retired. Of all the feasts they had attended in Terahnee, this had been the most sumptuous, each course a feast in itself, such that after a time they had not eaten so much as tasted the food before complimenting their host. Not that Ro'Eh Ro'Dan had seemed to mind. He had been far more interested in what Atrus had to say of the D'ni Guilds and the Common Book Rooms and all of those many other things that were, it seemed, quite alien to Terahnee life. In particular, he had been fascinated by the mention of the Maintainers, and had questioned Atrus a full hour and a half about their practices.

"Astonishing!" he had said finally.

"Why so?" Atrus had asked. "If anything, the absence of such a body is what I find most incredible about your land, Ro'Eh Ro'Dan."

"You think so? Why, I would find it strange indeed if, in a land where everyone has all they wish for, anyone should want what another has enough to take it. And as for quarrels, they happen, yet if a society is *civilized* enough, and the people distant enough from each other not to let it bother them, then violence cannot take seed. Still, I suppose it is all a question of what one is used to."

"That is so," Atrus had agreed. "Yet it is still quite astonishing to find that in an orchard so vast and varied as Terahnee, one does not find a single rotten apple."

Ro'Eh Ro'Dan had inclined his head at that. "It has all to do with good horticulture, Atrus. True breeding brings the best results, wouldn't you say?"

But there the conversation had ended, as the great gong sounded and the entertainer—a scholar, versed in the ancient prophesies—had stepped up to begin his recitation.

Now, three hours later, Atrus sat down on the edge of the massive bed and began to pull off his boots.

"I think he will be receptive to the idea, Catherine."

Catherine was standing before the mirror. Looking up, she met Atrus's eyes in the glass.

"He seems a kind and cultured man."

"Indeed. A man after our own minds. Yet having spoken to him one thing troubles me."

"What thing is that?"

"What he said about his people. About their breeding. It made me consider our own people."

"They are good people, Atrus."

"Oh, I know that. Yet can we vouch for every single one of them? D'ni and Averone and all? What if one bad apple among them spreads contagion? This is a land without contention. I would be loath to introduce it to them."

Catherine smiled and turned to face him. "I think you worry too much, Atrus. You know our people. They are the best. They will fit in easily here. So put your proposition to him, then burn the Books and seal the Temple up."

"And Chroma'Agana?"

"Oh, I shall miss it, but it's a small price to pay."

"Are you happy here, Catherine?"

She came across and took his hands, smiling down at him. "Very. Now put your doubts aside. This is what you wanted. So reach for it. Heal the breach and bring the D'ni home to Terahnee."

He smiled and squeezed her hands. "It shall be so."

§

In the dawn's first light the pinnacle of the king's high chamber, a slender tower separate from the rest of that great stone pile, jutted from the great bowl of darkness beneath, its whiteness touched with gold. A

narrow bridge of stone linked it to the rest; a curving line of white etched delicately on the black.

Looking across at the king's tower from the recessed doorway in which he stood, Atrus hesitated, thinking of the meeting to come, then stepped out onto the bridge, his booted footsteps echoing in the silence, his cloak flowing behind him in the cold morning air.

He had woken while it was still dark and, dressing quietly so as not to wake Catherine, had ventured out. It was not that he had expected to see the king so early—indeed, he was surprised to learn from the steward that Ro'Eh Ro'Dan was already in his rooms—merely that he felt he needed to walk and consider precisely what it was he was to say to the king that morning.

Yet here he was, before the sun was fully risen, stepping out across the dark to meet with him.

Halfway across, he stopped and, grasping the balustrade, leaned out, staring down into the shadowed depths. Down there—a mile or more below where he stood on that narrow parapet—the city slept, oblivious of him. He took in the pattern of the parks and buildings, the endless bridges and canals, pleased by what he saw, then raised his eyes, looking to the distance, to rolling hills and wondrous mansions stretching from horizon to horizon.

It truly was a land without equal.

He took a long breath, then let it out, giving a single nod, as if in that moment he had confirmed some fact that until then had not been certain.

"Atrus?"

He turned. Ro'Eh Ro'Dan was standing at the far end of the bridge, his head bare, his dark blue cloak wrapped tightly about him.

"Come…there's breakfast if you want it."

The very informality of the words and the casual gesture that accompanied them reassured Atrus. The friendly intimacy of the previous evening was still there between them, and as Atrus stepped up to Ro'Eh Ro'Dan, the other took his arm and, with a smile, led him inside.

Inside was a large circular chamber, at the center of which was a massive desk. Five elegantly robed ancients stood about, several of whom Atrus had met the night before. As Atrus and the king entered, they lowered their heads respectfully. It was a cozy room, its luxuries

surprisingly simple ones. The stone walls to either side of the doorway were bare, while, on the far side, a twist of stairs followed the curve of the wall, leading up to a recessed wooden door.

After the magnificence of the audience chamber, this was unexpectedly low-key, yet Atrus, looking about him, found himself more impressed by this than the grandeur he had seen elsewhere, for this spoke of the more human side of Terahnee.

"Gentlemen…we can continue later."

Smiling at Atrus, the ancients departed, leaving him alone with Ro'Eh Ro'Dan. The king turned, facing him.

"Did you sleep well, Atrus?"

"Wonderfully."

"Good." He smiled. "You know, I am glad to have the chance to speak with you alone. But come. We can talk while we eat."

Atrus followed the king up the twist of stairs and out into daylight. Five narrow steps led up onto a platform. Stepping out onto it, Atrus stared in real delight, for it had been laid out as a tiny formal garden, at the center of which was a low table and two long chairs.

A breakfast meal had been laid out on the table, but it was not that which caught Atrus's attention; it was the beauty of the delicate flowers that lay on every side, their tiny blooms cascading over the edges of the platform.

Atrus went over to the edge and stood there, looking out. There were no walls. If he stepped out now he would fall a mile or more, and it was that—that absence of any barrier between this and what lay beneath—that gave this place its unearthly beauty. All around him was the world, and here this tiny perfect garden.

"It's beautiful," he said, turning back.

"I am glad you think so." Ro'Eh Ro'Dan gestured toward the seat. "Won't you join me, Atrus?"

Atrus took a seat, conscious that beneath him was a mile of empty air. A cool breeze blew, ruffling his hair. He let his eyes wander over the perfection of the garden, then looked to Ro'Eh Ro'Dan once more.

Ro'Eh Ro'Dan was watching him attentively, his deep blue eyes trying to fathom something. And then he seemed to relax. Once more he smiled.

"You seem surprised," he said brightly.

“Everything here surprises me.”

“Has D’ni not its wonders?”

“Compared to this?” Atrus shook his head. “No. Not even at its height.”

“I see.” Ro’Eh Ro’Dan looked down, frowning. “You speak almost as though your land were in decline.”

“Decline? No, that is no word for it. The truth is D’ni fell. It is no more. Unless you count its ruins.”

Ro’Eh Ro’Dan sat back, clearly shocked. “But I thought…”

“There are survivors,” Atrus went on, “and I have been trying to rebuild. Even so…” He met the young king’s eyes. “I wish to ask you something, Ro’Eh Ro’Dan.”

The king seemed stunned; even so he nodded. “Ask.”

“I would like to bring my people here from D’ni, to settle permanently in Terahnee.”

“Of course. There’s room for everyone.” Yet the king seemed distracted now. “D’ni fallen…” He shook his head once more, then stood. “You must tell me all that happened, Atrus. Everything…right from the beginning.”

§

Catherine was awake when he returned.

“It is done!” he said joyously. “Ro’Eh Ro’Dan has agreed to have us here. Space will be found for all our people.”

Catherine stood. “That’s wonderful!”

“We spent a long time talking, discussing D’ni, our people, and the tragedy that befell us. And it was strange, Catherine, for I sensed that whilst he was shocked and sad for us, another part of him reacted differently. I don’t know what it was, for by no sign or word was he unkind, yet…”

He stopped, conscious suddenly that Eedrah was in the doorway.

“Forgive me my intrusion,” Eedrah began, “but I think I can explain. Not many know of these things, but the king most certainly would.”

“Know?” Atrus asked. “Know of what?”

“Of the ancient prophecy. That Terahnee would fall. That a great cloud of darkness would descend and destroy it with its poisoned breath.”

Both Atrus and Catherine now stared at Eedrah.

“So you see,” Eedrah went on, “your tragedy might prove our joy. At least, that is one interpretation. Since our earliest times we have dreaded this calamity and now you come and tell us it has already happened, and that we, here in Terahnee, have come through it totally unscathed. You can be sure right now that Ro’Eh Ro’Dan is meeting with his close advisers and telling them this news.”

Eedrah smiled. “It will do your people no harm, Atrus. No harm at all.”

“Maybe not, yet if I had known this beforehand I might have broached the matter differently.”

“My husband does not believe in prophecies,” Catherine explained. “He thinks them unscientific.”

“As they are. But Eedrah is right. And what’s done is done. Our task now is to unify our peoples and to bring them here to their new home in Terahnee. Nothing else must distract us. The king has given his permission. Space will be made.”

“He knows how many are to come?”

“I said five thousand.”

Eedrah looked surprised. “Is that *all* of you that remain?”

“On D’ni and on Averone, yes. And fortunately so, perhaps, for how would even a great land like this take on any bigger number?”

“With ease,” Eedrah said, a strangeness in his voice. He looked away a moment, then looked back. “Did the king say he wished to meet with you again?”

“He did. But not today. He has given his permission for us to return at once to Ro’Jethhe, there to organize the linking through of all the D’ni.”

“Then I shall see to things,” Eedrah said, and, turning, hastened from the room.

Atrus looked to Catherine. “All will be for the best.”

“Yes.” But she seemed distracted, too. “Forgive me, Atrus, but I wish to speak with Eedrah a moment. Something he said…”

“Of course. I shall pack, then see the others. There is not a moment to be wasted.”

“No.” She smiled. “I shall not be long.” Then, turning from him, she hurried after Eedrah, anxious to catch up with him.

§

Eedrah was silent on the journey home, withdrawn, and when Catherine asked him what it was he would not say, preferring to look away from her rather than answer her question.

Atrus, however, was full of plans, and spent much of the journey back discussing with Catherine and the rest how best to transfer all their people through.

Marrim, when she first heard of Atrus’s plan, had fallen silent, and for almost half a day had said nothing. It was only when she understood that Atrus meant to include those from Averone that she perked up again. But even then she had reservations. These she resolved to keep to herself until she had a chance to speak privately with Atrus.

That chance occurred the first night of their journey back.

“Atrus?” she asked, closing the door quietly behind her.

Atrus looked up from where he was writing in his notebook, then gestured for her to come across. She was silent while he finished.

“Well?” he asked, closing the book.

“What if they will not come?”

“Your people, you mean?”

She nodded. “It is their home, after all.” She hesitated, then, “Could you not write a Book, from here to there?”

“No, Marrim.”

She looked down.

“It will be all right,” Atrus said. “They will be happy here. There must be seas on this world. We’ll ask Ro’Eh Ro’Dan to find a place for them beside one. So do not let it trouble you anymore. There’s a great deal of work to be done, arranging the move. Let that fill your mind over the coming days.”

She looked up and smiled.

Atrus returned her smile. “Eedrah tells me we are to start early and travel direct to Ro’Jethhe tomorrow. It will be a long journey, so get what rest you can.”

Marrim laughed. “You speak almost as if we shall be walking back, not sailing in a boat!”

In answer Atrus handed her the notebook. “Take this. I want you to read the last ten pages. And then, tomorrow, I want you to consider the best way of persuading your people that this move is in their best interests.”

Marrim bowed her head, giving a single nod.

“Good. Then go now. Tomorrow will be a long day.”

§

Jethhe Ro’Jethhe hugged Atrus to him, then stepped back, looking about him at the others. It was late evening now, and the lamps that hung from the flower-strewn balconies threw a pearled light over the pool and the silken awnings of the boat.

“I hear that everything went well!” Ro’Jethhe said. “Indeed, I hear that your people are to join us here in Terahnee.”

Atrus smiled broadly. “That is so, Ro’Jethhe. It is a good day for both our peoples.”

“An excellent day. And we must celebrate.” Ro’Jethhe clapped his hands. At once a door opened in the wall behind them and a ramp descended. As Atrus turned, he saw that two ledges of stone had extended from the sides of the pool to cover all except the boat, which lay completely enclosed at the center. “Come,” Ro’Jethhe said, leading them across, “I have invited a few friends.”

He turned to Atrus, smiling as he walked on. “Oh, you are quite famous now, Atrus. There are many who wish to see you. Why, there would not be room, even in the governor’s halls, for so many. But I have asked one or two whom you might find interesting.” He raised a hand quickly. “Oh, and I know you have traveled far today, but we shall not keep you up all evening. Besides, I did not wish the moment to pass when we might toast the joint future of our peoples.”

Atrus smiled. “Nor I.” And with that he let Ro’Jethhe lead his party up the ramp and into the great hall where a good number of Ro’Jethhe’s friends awaited them.

§

The evening had gone well, but now it was late. Irras had been dispatched to the plateau once again to warn master Tamon of their imminent return, and Atrus would have followed would it not have offended their host. And so he sat on, doing what he so rarely did—socializing late into the night.

Talking to the local landowners, it was clear that none of them felt threatened by the proposed influx from D'ni. It was just as the king had said—when everyone had so much why should they begrudge others sharing their good fortune?—and that, as much as anything, had convinced Atrus finally that everything would work out for the best.

Catherine, looking across at Atrus, smiled, for she had rarely seen him in such good humor. Now that the king had been informed, he was free to talk of D'ni and its ways, and was enjoying doing so. Just now the talk had turned to the art of writing and to the kind of Ages the D'ni wrote. Ro'Jethhe's friends plied Atrus with question after question, fascinated by the whole notion of Guilds and particularly the Guild of Maintainers, though they clearly found it hard to comprehend just why such a Guild should exist in the first place.

"But *why?*" one of them insisted for perhaps the dozenth time. "Why do you need such a highly specialized Guild?"

"To restrain the weaker-minded," Atrus answered patiently, "to protect against faulty Ages, and to ensure there is no abuse of the Ages."

Another of the locals laughed. A drunken laughter. "But civilized people control themselves, so they can be seen!"

Atrus laughed awkwardly, not understanding the statement.

The local continued. "We write, we live, we control ourselves, we are seen." Pounding his chest with each *we*.

"I beg pardon," Atrus said, still smiling and looking for a clue to what was being said.

"Self-restraint and the ability to write. They distinguish us from the beasts, wouldn't you say, Atrus? They make us what we are. Men, and not unseen beasts."

"Of course we are not beasts," Atrus replied awkwardly. "But what is seen? What beasts are unseen?"

“You have much to learn.” The local laughed. “Perhaps your lenses can help you see the beasts that we cannot.”

Laughter broke out among the guests.

Atrus enjoyed riddles, but now he was the focus of the entertainment, without having a clue of what was being discussed. It unsettled him. But he gathered his wits and began to consider the information he had been given. Seen, unseen, control, writing, beasts…the choice of that particular D’ni word, bahro, was an odd one. It was a derivative of the root word for beast, bah, easily recognized, but the suffix ro had been added. It had to be a key to the riddle. The Terahnee would often prefix a name with ro in order to represent a people group, household, or family. Now he wondered what those combined words could imply. Beast families or households, unseen, what was unseen? Perhaps it referred to farms where unseen beasts were raised for food. No, he’d heard them use the word for beast without ro when referring to livestock. Wild animals—families or packs of unseen wild animals, out of control, in the far reaches of this Age, perhaps dangerous. That had to be it.

“Are we in danger when traveling beyond the civilized lands? Are there beasts that might be hostile?” Atrus tossed out the question looking for some confirmation of his conclusion.

Laughter again filled the room.

Atrus once again had to smile. He was not on the right trail.

“The beasts are neither civilized, nor distant, nor hostile, nor seen.” The local was truly enjoying this impromptu contest of wits. In fact, everyone in the entire gathering was smiling, watching.

Except Eedrah. Atrus noted that he was hanging on every word of the exchange, but intensely—deeply staring at Atrus, without a hint of a smile on his face. It was enough of a contrast to the others as to cause Atrus to lose his train of thought. He stared back at Eedrah.

The riddler continued. “The civilized control the civilized *and* the uncivilized. The civilized see the civilized *but* the uncivilized see all.”

Cheers arose from around the room.

Atrus glanced back at the speaker, the last clue simply adding to his confusion. He smiled and raised his hands upward, signaling surrender. The guests erupted in applause as the riddler took a bow.

Ro’Jethhe stepped in. “Atrus, it is not so difficult. You will be surprised at the answer.” He was smiling broadly. “Writers and non-

writers, it is merely a riddle of words. Bahro, or beast-people, and ahrotahntee, non-writers, otherworlders. Clever, yes?"

Atrus let the words sink in—still not grasping what the connection was. "Beast people?"

"Why, yes," Ro'Jethhe replied, reaching across to take a fresh cup of wine. "It is, after all, only we of Terahnee and D'ni who can write. The ahrotahntee have no such talent. It is why things are as they are. Surely it is so in D'ni, Atrus?"

Ahrotahntee. Catherine, grasping the riddle, felt herself go cold. She had not heard the term since Atrus's father, Gehn, had used it. *Outsiders*, it meant. *Book-worlders*. Those who were not of D'ni blood. Or Terahnee…

Atrus sat up straight. "With great respect, you are mistaken, Ro'Jethhe. The ahrotahntee *can* write. You have only to teach them."

There was a shocked silence. All eyes were on Atrus now, as if he had spoken something obscene.

Ro'Jethhe looked aside, clearly embarrassed. "You jest with us, Atrus, surely?"

Atrus looked about him, his eyes going from face to face, not understanding what was going on. "But Catherine writes, and *she* is ahrotahntee!"

There was a universal gasp. A look of utter shock had come to Jethhe Ro'Jethhe's face, while all about the chamber men glared at Atrus and his party with open hostility, while their wives and daughters blushed and looked down. Even several of the stewards, who were not known to react, had glanced up at Atrus's words and were looking to one another, as if asking what to do.

"Take care what you say," Ro'Jethhe said, wiping his mouth.

"But it is true," Atrus said, ignoring Catherine's hand on his arm. "Indeed, my grandmother and my mother were both ahrotahntee!"

There was sudden uproar. Ro'Jethhe stood, looking to the stewards, who immediately went to the doors and, taking keys from the belts about their waists, proceeded to lock them. Ro'Jethhe watched them, then, his face hard and angry, turned back, facing Atrus.

"Even were such things true," he said, "they should not be uttered. The unseen…"

“The unseen?” Atrus said, standing and taking a step toward his host. “What is this riddle?”

Atrus stopped, listening suddenly. There were noises in the walls surrounding them. A bumping and then a distinct thud, followed by a curse. Then, suddenly, a door opened in the wall where, but a split second before, there had been no door. Atrus knew that because he had been staring at the spot the very instant it had opened. And through that door, like ghosts, came six pale, silent figures, their shaven heads like ivory, their black, tight-fitting clothes making them seem more like ciphers than men. For they were men, despite their bowed, obedient heads, their averted eyes, their palpable fear of the steward who, with a snarling face, drove them silently across the floor between the Terahnee and out through a second door that opened as though by magic.

Atrus looked about him, wondering for that brief instant why they were not all as shocked as he was shocked, but all he saw were statues—faces that stared but did not see; eyes that, for that moment, were blank as stone. And as he saw them he understood, and that understanding sank into him, deeper and deeper, like a smooth, dark rock tumbling slowly to the ocean floor.

Slaves. The relyimah—the “unseen”—were slaves. And this whole place…

Atrus’s mind reeled. Looking about him now, he saw not a world of splendor, but a world built to his father’s dark design; a world where the false notion of blood had so blinded its natives that they saw their fellow men as beasts—that was, when they designed to see them at all.

The thought of it staggered him.

Atrus turned, looking to Jethhe Ro’Jethhe, seeing the man suddenly transformed. But his host, this seemingly genial man he had thought so kind, was glaring at him now.

“I spoke but the truth,” Atrus said.

Ro’Jethhe’s answering words were curt, acidic. “You have said enough. Nor will you repeat what you have said. Do you understand me, Atrus of D’ni?”

“Oh, I see now,” Atrus answered, a coldness shaping his words. “I see and understand.”

“Make sure you do.” Ro’Jethhe turned, gesturing to his senior steward. “Kaaru!”

At once the steward was at his side.

“See Master Atrus and his party to their rooms. And make sure they stay there.”

“What is this, Ro’Jethhe?” Atrus protested.

“It appears we cannot trust your lying tongue. That being so, you will be confined to your rooms until I get word from the king.” And with that he turned his back and hurried from the room. Within a minute all the rest of the Terahnee had likewise gone.

Atrus turned, looking to his tiny party, then looked across at the steward. The man had never seemed handsome, but now, studying his features, Atrus thought he could detect something brutish, something almost bestial about him. The steward, however, merely bowed.

“If you would come with me…”

§

Back in their room they held a crisis meeting. Catherine, Marrim, Carrad, Oma, and Esel sat in chairs while Atrus paced the floor like a caged animal.

“We cannot stay,” Catherine said.

“I agree,” Esel said. “We should leave here immediately.”

Oma nodded. “Yes, and destroy the Books *and* seal the Great King’s Temple once again.”

Atrus shook his head. “The king gave his word.”

“Yes,” Catherine said, “but that was when he thought we were D’ni. Now we are ahrotahntee.” She laughed bitterly. “Why, it’s a wonder they can still *see* us!”

Atrus turned, facing her. “I do not like this any more than you, Catherine. But Ro’Eh Ro’Dan is a decent man. I believe he will keep his word.”

“You want to stay?”

“Perhaps we should. We might use our influence to change things here.”

“*Change* things?” Catherine looked away. “All right,” she said. “Do what you must. But send Carrad back to tell Master Tamon what we know.”

“And what *do* we know?”

“That this is a slave society. What more do we *need* to know?”

“How they treat their slaves, perhaps?” Atrus said.

“But what *can* we do?” Oma asked. “You heard Eedrah. There are two hundred million of them.”

“We wait. But first we send Carrad back to the plateau.” Atrus paused, then shook his head, clearly distressed. “There has been a misunderstanding, on *both* our parts, but the Terahnee never lied to us.”

“Only because we never asked the right questions!”

Atrus looked to Catherine. “That’s true. We let what we saw seduce us; we mistook the surface for the substance. But that was our fault, not theirs! As I say, they never lied.”

“But this whole world is a lie!”

“Maybe so, but we cannot blame Ro’Jethhe and his like for that. They know nothing else.”

“And that is what I most fear,” Catherine said. “You want to give them eyes, Atrus, but what if they do not want to see? What if we cannot *make* them see? Conditioning is a powerful thing. To break it in an individual is difficult enough, but when that conditioning is social…”

“You forget one thing, Catherine. We have the ear of the king.”

“His ear, yes, but not his eyes.” She stared back at him, then, quieter. “I think you’re wrong, Atrus. I don’t believe they *can* be changed.”

§

Atrus woke in the night from a fitful sleep—a sleep plagued by dreams of doors opening and closing before and behind, in rooms that turned and twisted in an unending maze—and turned, expecting to find Catherine there beside him in the bed. But she was gone.

He sat up, then saw her, there on the far side of the room, at the desk, a lamp beside her as she wrote in her journal.

“Catherine?”

She half-turned toward him. “I couldn’t sleep. So I began to reread what I’d written since we came here.”

“And?” He stood, then went across, taking a chair beside her.

“Kitchens. There were no kitchens. That alone should have alerted me. All that food awaiting us wherever we went, and no sign of it ever having been prepared. It was like everything. Magical, it seemed. And we accepted that.”

“We had no reason not to.”

“No. And then there was what Hadre said to us when he first met us. Do you remember? He said, ‘Can I see you?’ And his eyes—I remember it now—they seemed to look straight through us. Until you mentioned D’ni. And then it was like a connection was made. He s*aw* us.”

“And Eedrah, too…” Atrus shook his head. “I’d come to like him. But how can I trust him now? He might have told us. Indeed, he *should* have told us.”

“Maybe he thought we knew.”

There was a knock. Atrus looked to Catherine, then stood and walked over to the door.

“Who is it?” he asked quietly.

“It is I. Eedrah. I need to talk with you.”

Atrus opened the door a fraction. Eedrah was standing there in the half-dark, alone.

“All right,” Atrus said, opening the door more fully.

Eedrah hesitated, then stepped through. As the door closed behind him, he glanced about him nervously. “There’s something I must show you.”

§

Silently they followed, down to the end of that long, shadowed corridor and left into a narrow gallery. There, a mere two or three paces in, Eedrah stopped and, leaning into the wall, pushed.

A door opened where a door had not been.

They followed, down three narrow steps and into a dark passage that ran *within* the walls. Atrus reached out and touched the smooth, worn stone. No wonder the walls had seemed so thick.

Two steps in and the door closed silently, depriving them of light. Several seconds passed and then a glow grew in the darkness close by,

illuminating first the hand that held the lamp, and then the face, the chest, the walls surrounding them.

Eedrah put a finger to his lips, then turned and walked on.

On, through branching corridors and down a long, straight flight of steps, the stone worn by four thousand years of use. And as they went, Atrus saw it in his mind. Saw the endless silent figures who had passed this way, fetching and carrying, never a word or sound betraying their presence to their masters behind the walls.

The relyimah—the Unseen.

Now and then they would pass a row of niches set into the wall, in which were all manner of things for cleaning and repairs. Elsewhere were built-in storage cupboards, and everywhere doors and tunnels branched off. Here, too, at this lower level, were well-stocked kitchens with long, marble-topped tables and huge stone shelves, and massive pantries, every surface spotlessly clean.

All was revealed in the pale white glow of the lamp, appearing from nothing and vanishing behind them in the dark.

A whole world beneath the world.

Beyond the kitchens the tunnel broadened and four long, broad rails of glistening silver were set into the floor, running parallel into the darkness ahead. They walked between those rails, beneath a high, curved ceiling. A hundred paces they went and then the tunnel opened out into a broad chamber, along both sides of which, on spurs that jutted from the central lines, rested the empty wagons that ran upon the rails. Huge wagons of some dull, rocklike material, thick ropes hanging limply from the great eye-like hooks that studded their sides.

On they went, into a smaller tunnel that turned then briefly climbed. Above them now the ceiling was breached every so often by big circular vents. Glancing up, Atrus had a glimpse of stars—a tight circle of brightly glimmering stars as at the bottom of a deep, deep well.

And on, through a strange gallery that ran away into the darkness on either side. Here, to their right as they passed, a dozen thick ropes stretched down diagonally from a long gash high up on the wall to the far side, where they were tethered to about a dozen big, studlike protuberances, that seemed to swell like mushrooms from the surface of the floor.

Like the taut strings of a huge musical instrument, Atrus thought, not understanding what he saw.

And then, suddenly, they were standing before a massive studded door, into which was set a grill. Eedrah turned to them, then lightly rapped upon the door.

No noise. No sounds of hurrying feet. Only that same dead silence. So silent, that Atrus did not at first notice that the grill had opened. A face stared out at them for an instant and then the grill snapped shut.

Slowly the door swung back. Eedrah looked to them again, his eyes imploring them to understand, then he turned back, leading them through, into a dimly lit chamber.

The ceiling of the chamber was high above them and the walls were crudely cut. Long, twisting flights of steps led up those walls to doors set deep into the stone. Twenty, maybe thirty doors, giving access to six separate levels that all led off this chamber.

Atrus turned back, to see that the man who had admitted them was still standing there, his head bowed, his eyes averted, his every aspect menial and subservient. By his shaven head and his jet-black tight-fitting clothes Atrus knew at once that he was relyimah.

“Come,” Eedrah said quietly, speaking for the first time since they had entered that great warren. “There is someone you must meet.”

§

As Eedrah and Atrus stepped into the room, the old man glanced up from his book, then quickly stood, his head lowered, his eyes averted. The room was small and cramped, the old man’s desk filling a good half of it, but the surface of the desk was piled high with Books. That in itself was wholly unexpected.

“Welcome Atrus,” the old man said, keeping his head lowered. “I am Hersha.”

Atrus looked to Eedrah queryingly, then gave a tiny bow. “I am pleased to meet you, Hersha.”

“He is leader here,” Eedrah said.

“Leader?”

“Of the relyimah. Hersha is their great secret. Not even the stewards know he is here.”

“I am astonished,” Atrus said.

Eedrah looked to him, a sudden seriousness in his eyes. “I thought you knew. D’ni…”

“…is not like this. We have no slaves. No relyimah. Nor did we ever permit them in our worlds.”

“Yes…I see that now.” Eedrah looked down. “There have been misunderstandings. I thought you other than you are. And you, Atrus…you doubtlessly think me other than I am.”

“You are their friend?”

Hersha answered for him. “Eedrah does what he can to help. But he is a rarity. Not one in ten thousand is like him.”

Atrus looked back at Eedrah, seeing him in a new light. “You *see* them, whereas your father does not, is that right?”

“Yes.”

“And you, Hersha, what do you see?”

“The waste of it,” Hersha answered, daring to meet Atrus’s eyes once again. “The ruinous waste.”

§

While the three men talked, Catherine toured the silent maze of rooms at the heart of the slave quarters, horrified by what she saw. After the casual luxuries of the world above, the primitive conditions down here were quite appalling. Young men slept forty to a tiny space, five to each of the narrow alcoves that had been cut from the rock—more catacombs than beds; the coldness of the stone covered only by the thinnest layer of sackcloth. Their washrooms were basic, more cattle troughs than bathrooms, and their kitchens were tiny and inadequate.

As she walked among them, those few that were awake turned from her, afraid to meet her eyes, shying from her inquisitive gaze as though from a blowtorch. Yet she could not help but see how badly they had been treated. Their pale limbs were covered with ugly, purple weals,

while a few sported scars, fresh and long-healed, their severity clear evidence of far harsher brutalities.

"Who did this?" she asked, turning to face Atrus as he joined her.

"The P'aarli," Atrus answered. "The stewards. It seems they regularly beat the relyimah, to make sure they are obedient…and silent."

Catherine made to speak, then saw the old man who stood just behind Atrus, next to Eedrah.

"This is Hersha," Eedrah said. "He is the leader of the slaves."

"They have a leader?"

"Yes, and a religion, too." Atrus took a slender volume from his pocket and handed it to her.

Catherine studied it a moment, then looked up at him wide-eyed. "These are the ancient prophecies." She frowned. "But why is it *their* book?"

Eedrah answered her. "Because of four lines in one of the oldest prophecies—four lines that speak of the freeing of the slaves."

"I see."

"With respect, I am not sure you do," Hersha said, almost hunching into himself as he spoke.

"What do you mean?" Eedrah asked.

"I mean that those lines are not in isolation. And with things being as they are…"

This was all too cryptic for Atrus. He interrupted. "What *do* you mean, things being as they are?"

Eedrah looked down. "Things are happening, Atrus. There is a sickness…"

"A sickness?" Catherine stepped closer.

Eedrah nodded. "It is a recent thing. Over the last few days a number of the relyimah took to their beds with stomach cramps. It was thought at first that they had eaten something bad, but their condition has worsened and many of them are now running a fever."

"Can I see them?"

Hersha led them down a corridor and through another of the hidden doors into a long, low chamber, at the far end of which, on makeshift pallets, a dozen or more relyimah lay, several of their fellows in attendance.

Going over to them, Catherine knelt and began to examine one of the sick. She was silent a moment as she felt the glands at the man's neck, peered into his pale, unconscious eyes, and felt his pulse. She looked up at Atrus, concerned. "We need to help these men—we need equipment and medical supplies."

"Whatever you need," Eedrah said. "I shall have it brought at once."

§

Back in their room in the great house, Catherine and Atrus sat across from Eedrah as he talked.

"It was my fifteenth season when I first saw one of the Slave Ages. As a child, of course, you have to be taught not to see the slaves. Trained not to speak to them or even notice them. Not that you would see them all that often, for the stewards keep them out of sight as much as possible. But by fifteen your eyes have learned not to see, your brain not to make the connection. It isn't difficult. But I guess my illness made me different."

"Your illness?" Atrus asked.

"A simple fever. But I almost died. A harvesting slave found me in the orchards outside and carried me into the house."

"And was rewarded, I hope," Catherine said.

Eedrah swallowed and looked down. "He was killed. Executed by the stewards for the impertinence of touching a master."

Atrus and Catherine both stared at him, shocked.

"So it is here. Remember the entertainer? The gymnast who fell?"

"Ah, yes," Catherine said. "I wondered how he was."

"He was severely punished for his mistake."

Catherine shook her head. "No…"

"It *is* our way. Mistakes are not tolerated. You saw how he did not even make a noise though he was in pain. Had he done so, the stewards would have killed him without hesitation."

Atrus sighed. "I did not know."

"Nor I," Eedrah said. "Not until that first visit. Then I saw how the young boys were recruited. Not orphans, as I'd speculated, but ordinary children like myself, only boys of four and five, taken from their parents

and relocated in Training Ages where, in circumstances of the most extreme cruelty, they were prepared for service in Terahnee. Those Training Ages are the bleakest places I have ever seen, and the children are taught in the crudest manner to obey or die."

"Does Ro'Eh Ro'Dan know of this?"

For a moment Eedrah stared at Atrus in disbelief. "Do you not see it yet, Atrus? Ro'Eh Ro'Dan *authorizes* it. He is in charge of this terrible system. He and his ministers set the quotas. They say how many boys are to be taken from their families and trained."

Atrus stared and stared.

"I know," Eedrah said quietly. "It is hard to believe."

"But he was so kind to us. You were all so kind, so hospitable."

"It is a kindness that is confined to our own kind. While my people believed you to be exactly as themselves, they accorded you the same rights and benefits. But now…"

Catherine had been looking down into her lap, now she looked up again. "Why did you say nothing of this before now?"

"Because I did not know whether I could trust you."

"And when did you know?"

"Last evening. When you were puzzled by the riddle. And I saw your faces when those slaves were led away."

"Were they beaten?" Atrus asked, a hollowness in his voice.

"No, Atrus. They were killed. You see, it could not be allowed for them to repeat what you said in that room."

"Then we must do something."

Eedrah grimaced. "There is nothing you *can* do, can't you see that? You heard Hersha. There is not one in ten thousand of my people think as I think. And you saw how my father treated you the moment he heard that you were not pure D'ni. And so will the king treat you when he hears. You would be best to flee while you can!"

Atrus shook his head. "No. I will *not* run away. Besides, the king *will* keep his word. Terahnee he might be, but he is also a man."

Eedrah stood, exasperated now. "Don't you understand, Atrus? They will kill you. As surely as they killed those slaves. Indeed, you would all be dead right now but for the fact that you are still under the king's protection."

Seeing that Atrus would not be budged, Eedrah said, “All right. I’ll do what I can to help you, but I must return now and help Hersha with the sickness, before the P’aarli come back on duty.”

“Are you not afraid for yourself, Eedrah?” Catherine asked.

Eedrah turned back. “For myself, no. But there are times when I fear for my own people. There is something missing in them. A depth. I don’t know what you’d call it. A void, perhaps. And they fill it with cleverness and all manner of distractions. Like the rooms.”

“I did not know,” Atrus said once more, anguish in his face.

“You are not to blame,” Eedrah said.

“Yes, but…” He looked to Eedrah suddenly, frowning, “You thought we knew. You thought we condoned it.”

Eedrah nodded. “Yes. But now I *see* you.”

PART SIX

THE CREAK OF CART WHEELS

IN THE SILENT DARK.

DEAD MEN FALL BETWEEN THE WORLDS.

A TIME OF GREAT SORROWING.

--FROM THE URAKH’NIKAR

VV. 87-89

Atrus woke, strangely refreshed, the sunlit peacefulness of the room making the events of the previous evening seem strangely dreamlike. Beside him, Catherine slept on.

Slowly it all came back, and as it did the sunlight seemed to fade until there was a darkness underneath all things.

Even the birdsong seemed transformed.

Careful not to wake her, Atrus rose and pulled on his robe. He did not know what time it was, but from the way the shadows fell in the room, the sun was high, the day well advanced. That, too, was strange.

He began to cross the room, then stopped. There, on the desk where Catherine had been writing, was her equipment box. It had not been there when they had gone to sleep, but now it was. And beside it was a note.

Atrus went across. The note was addressed to him. He slit it open and unfolded the single sheet:

> *Atrus,*
> *Eedrah has told me everything. It is hard to believe but I do not think he lies. He warns us to prepare for a hurried departure and that I have done. At a word from you the Books will be destroyed and the link between the Ages closed for good, but I shall not do this unless I must. I send both Irras and Carrad back to you with this, as well as medical supplies and equipment. Our thoughts are with you all.*
> *Master Tamon*

So Eedrah had gone himself to the plateau. Folding the note, Atrus slipped it into his pocket, then stepped outside, conscious now of the secret the massively thick walls held.

The corridor was empty, silent. No steward waited to do his bidding or anticipate his need.

Strange.

He walked from room to room, but it was as if the great house had been abandoned. There was no sound or sign of anyone. And then there came a shout, from the gardens outside. Going to a window, he threw it open and looked out. Marrim was down there. She seemed distressed. Seeing him, she waved furiously, then beckoned him to come.

“Wait there!” he called.

Marrim met him at the gate.

“What is it?” he asked, trying to calm her.

“It’s one of them. One of the slaves we saw. He’s just lying there. He won’t move. And his eyes…”

“Where, Marrim?”

She led him across an ornamental bridge and into a formal garden. There, on the other side of a small wall, not ten paces from what looked like a well, lay the slave.

Atrus crouched down beside him, feeling at the neck for a pulse. “He’s alive,” he said, looking up at Marrim. “Go ahead and warn Catherine. I’ll bring him up to our room.”

Marrim nodded then hurried off.

Atrus turned back. This one was but a boy—seven or eight years old at most—yet like the others he was scarred and bruised, and his anonymity was emphasized by the tight-fitting black clothes he wore and his closely shaven head.

Swallowing back the sudden anger he felt, Atrus put his arms beneath the child and lifted him up. It was not difficult, for the boy barely weighed a thing.

Cradling the child against his chest, Atrus walked back to the house, determined not to be stopped by any steward. But no one stopped him. The corridors and stairs of the house were empty, and when he reached his rooms, only Catherine and Marrim were there to greet him.

“But he’s only a boy,” Catherine said, astonished by how young this one was.

“You heard what Eedrah said,” Atrus answered, laying him carefully down on top of the covers. “They take them at four and five.”

Catherine sighed. Sitting on the bed beside the child, she opened her case and prepared some supplies. “Marrim,” she said, “I understand Irras and Carrad are back. Go fetch them. They can accompany me back to D’ni.”

Selecting a tool from within the case, she looked up at Atrus. “We need to know what this is. Perhaps we can find a cure.” Writing out a label, she fixed it to the side of a glass tube, then, taking a needle, took a sample of the boy’s blood from his arm.

“Do you think he’s dying?”

She did not answer, but that look said quite enough.

“We must do something,” he said. “We must bring back all of those who have medical skill. Oma will know who they are. Or ask for

volunteers."

Catherine nodded. Atrus stared at her a moment; only then did he realize that something was wrong.

"Are you all right, Catherine?"

She placed the sample tube into the slot in the case then closed the lid. Looking up at Atrus, she shrugged. "It's nothing physical. It's just…"

"I know," he said, not wanting her to say it. "But let us do what we can. Let us take each moment as it comes."

§

Nothing physical…

Catherine gazed at the sleeping child, then turned, looking about her at the room.

Strange that I didn't see it before…

Atrus had gone back to see Eedrah and the relyimah, leaving her to conduct her tests, but the tests were the last thing on her mind. For a moment earlier she had felt an abyss open beneath her—a vertiginous crack in reality that had threatened briefly to engulf her.

Words, she told herself; *they were only words*. But for that brief, ridiculous moment they had seemed the most meaningful, the most *real*, thing in the room, and yet they were only echoes in her head: the memory of two lines she had read in Gehn's notebook, months ago, lines that were strangely duplicated in the *Korokh Jimah*, the Great Book of Prophecies used by the relyimah.

Discordant time. The smallest of enemies un-mans them all. Hidden within the hidden. A breath and then darkness.

> *For a moment she had felt the way she used to feel when she was writing—in a fugue unrelated to her rational self. Atrus had taught her to focus that part of her through her conscious mind, but for a moment back there, shocked by all that had happened, she had felt herself let go…and the connection had been made.*

She had felt herself link to something deeper than the physical world. Something that lay *beneath* appearances.

Catherine turned back, looking at the child. But now she seemed to see beyond the flesh and bone, beyond the sickness that ravaged him.

There is a purpose to all this, she thought, and knew, even as the thought was framed, that it was true.

§

"Ah, Atrus, I wondered when you'd come."

Eedrah looked drained. Beside him, on the bare swept floor of the slave infirmary, the number of pallet beds had risen to more than a hundred, and on at least six of those the sheet had been pulled up over the occupant's head.

"Yes," Eedrah said, answering the unspoken query. "Whatever it is, it's killing them one by one."

"Then we, too, are in danger."

Eedrah smiled bleakly. "I have heard it has spread to other estates. And the stewards…they, too, have been struck down by it."

"I wondered where they had got to."

"Some of them fled, I'm told. Afraid. And Catherine?"

"She is returning to D'ni. She's taking a sample with her to analyze."

"Good." Eedrah yawned. "I must get some rest, else I shall be no good for anything."

"I agree. But before you go, tell me this, Eedrah. Has there ever been anything like this before? There must surely have been epidemics."

"Long, long ago, perhaps, but most of those have been eradicated. They inoculate all of the relyimah on the Training Ages. Diseased slaves are poor slaves, after all. So what this is, heaven alone knows. All we do know is that they don't seem to have any natural defenses against it."

"Then let us hope that Catherine can come up with an answer."

Eedrah nodded somberly. "Let us hope so, Atrus, before we all find ourselves grinning like the Lord of the Dead."

§

Jethhe Ro'Jethhe had not slept well after the events of the previous evening; he had tossed and turned, wondering whether he had been right to hold his hand and await word from the king, or whether he should have followed instinct and had the book-worlders slaughtered to the last man—and woman!—for their great heresy. After all, these were special circumstances, and the king had clearly not meant to extend his protection to any who were ahrotahntee. Against which was the possibility that he might be thought to have acted beyond his authority as a common citizen. After all, to act so precipitately might be thought a snub to the king himself, and that was unthinkable. Yet what if they slipped away? What if, when the king's word finally came, he could not carry out those high instructions?

And so it went on in his head, hour after hour into the night, until, exhausted, he had fallen into the deepest of sleeps and had overslept, so that now, at midday, he emerged from his room in a rage, bemused, not to say furious that Duura had not woken him earlier.

"Duura! *Duu-ra!"*

He was not properly dressed, and his hair was in a dreadful state, uncombed and tousled from sleep. Normally, it would all have been done long ago, and without him having to stand in an empty corridor and bellow.

Ro'Jethhe turned and went back into his suite of rooms, walking through to the great bathroom with its enormous sunken pool. On the far side of the empty pool, beyond the bathing chair—the great arm of which extended through a long slot in the wall—was his dressing room. He went there now, standing there and staring into the empty air, at a loss as to what to do. His eyes looked about the empty room, not seeing the young female slave who was slumped in one corner, his ears not registering her rasping breath.

"Where *is* the man?" he hissed. Then, hurrying from the room, he went out into the corridor again, bellowing down the echoing hallway.

"Duura! Du-u-uura!"

§

The main cavern of D'ni was dark and silent as the boat slid into the great harbor and tied up beneath the ancient steps. In the glow of the lamps that lined the harbor's edge, Catherine stepped from the boat and quickly mounted the steps, Carrad following a moment later.

As Catherine came up over the lip of the harbor, a figure—stooped and ancient—made its way across to her. She did not notice him until he hailed her.

"Catherine…I am surprised to see you back."

She turned and gave a tiny bow. "Master Tergahn…it's rather late for you to be up isn't it?"

Tergahn stepped closer, his heavily lined face coming into the light. "Not at all. The older you are, the less sleep you need. Until…" Tergahn blinked, owl-like, then gestured toward the case she was carrying. "Is that it?"

"The sample?" Yes. I suppose you know what's happening."

"I know."

She waited, but Tergahn said nothing more.

"Forgive me, Master Tergahn. I must press on. We need answers and we need them quickly."

"Then let me not keep you any longer."

Later, alone at the bench in the special sealed-and-sterile workroom, she watched the ancient centrifuge whirl round and round, separating the elements in the tube for examination by the Guild Healers who had been summoned. Catherine found herself wondering why the old man had bothered to make himself known to her. He had advised them strongly against setting off on this venture, certainly, and now that he'd been proved "right" he might be justified in crowing, in saying "I told you so," but there had been no sign of that in his rheumy eyes. Indeed, if she had seen anything there, it had been concern.

In a rack to the Healer's left were nine similar tubes, in two groups of four and five—tested and untested. To his right stood the great brass-and-stone viewing lens. The results so far were inconclusive. The sample seemed relatively harmless—*normal*, one might say. As the centrifuge slowed, he took the tube and, spilling a little into the transparent dish, placed it beneath the viewing plate and put his eye to the lens.

The Healer studied it a while, watching the strange microscopic dance of the living cells, fascinated by it. But this sample too seemed normal. His notebook was open on the bench beside him. Moving his eye away, he picked up his pen and began to write. The results made little sense as yet, but there were still a number of tests to make.

The Healer worked on, silent and methodical, content to wait patiently for the answer he knew must come. It was simply a matter of exhausting all the probabilities.

The centrifuge slowed. He took another tube from its grip and spilled a little of the precious liquid into the dish.

This time, the Healer's response was different as his eye reviewed the magnified specimen. He spoke briefly with Catherine and she quickly walked over to the air lock. Outside, Carrad operated the locks and she stepped through, into the isolation chamber.

Catherine felt the air flow over her arms and face as the filters switched on. A moment later the outer door opened with a hiss.

She stepped out. Carrad was standing there, his eyes expectant. "Have you…?"

She walked past him, her face closed. "Come," she said simply. "We must get back."

§

Ro'Jethhe stood at the top of the great sweep of steps, his right hand slickly gripping the rail. Beneath him, the whole stairway seemed to be pulsing; growing and then shrinking again, while the walls flickered grainily on every side.

He shook his head, but it didn't help. Sweat dripped from his forehead and ran down the side of his nose.

Something was wrong.

"Guu-reh…" he slurred. "Guh…"

He staggered, then turned, his back slamming against the wall. For a moment he stayed there, as if pinned to the wall, his eyes closed, the blackness pulsating madly about him. Then the fit passed and his eyes popped open once more.

The library. Duura would be in the library. Of course.

He pushed himself away, unsteady now, each step like a drunkard's, his legs far away from him suddenly. Crossing the enormous hallway, he lurched into the room, then swayed back, steadying himself against the massively thick doorway, his neck moving up and back in an exaggerated motion as he tried to focus on the room.

"My eyes," he said, with a quiet puzzlement. "Something's wrong with my eyes…"

Duura was at his desk on the far side of the room. For a moment Ro'Jethhe wondered what was wrong; wondered why the man had not come across the instant he had appeared in the doorway.

The arch of the door seemed to hold his hand like a sticky web. Ro'Jethhe turned his head, staring past his own shoulder at his hand, then forced it—*commanded* it—to push him out, away from the door.

He staggered slowly across the room, the pulsing at his temples and just behind his eyes making it seem as though the room were expanding and contracting. He was sheened in sweat now, and each breath was a shuddering effort, but the desk was not far away now. He was almost there.

"Duura," he said, straightening up, his voice at least sounding clear. "Duura!"

But the steward was ignoring him.

Ro'Jethhe blinked. There was a book open in front of the man and he seemed to be reading it intently. Lurching over to him, Ro'Jethhe grabbed the man's arms and shook him.

"Duura!"

He let go. Slowly the body toppled back, then slumped and slid, clattering to the floor in an ungainly heap, the chair beneath it.

Ro'Jethhe stepped back, horrified. Dead. Even he could see that Duura was dead.

"Eedrah…" he said softly. Then, turning, he began to shout. "Eedrah! Eedrah, where are you?"

§

Eedrah sat back, away from the dying slave, then wiped his forearm across his brow. He wasn't feeling well. He had tried to persuade

himself that it was only tiredness, but he knew now—he, too, had the disease.

Across the now-crowded room, Atrus was tending to one of the recently stricken. He wondered briefly if he should call to him and tell him what he suspected, then let the idea drop. Atrus had enough on his hands.

He felt a hand on his shoulder and looked up, to find Marrim crouching over him. “Eedrah? Are you all right?”

The concern in her eyes warmed him. ‘I’m not sure. I think…well, I think I’m coming down with it.”

Marrim nodded. “I’ve been watching you.”

“Watching me?”

“Yes, I didn’t think you looked well. I think you should go and rest now.”

He made to get up. “There isn’t time to rest.” But Marrim’s hand kept him down. He stared up at her again, surprised.

“Maybe you should return to the house,” she said.

“To lie down?” Eedrah shook his head. “No, here will do. If I must share their fate I will share their circumstances.”

She smiled fondly. “Did you hear they found several of the stewards…the P’aarli as you call them.”

“Dead?”

Marrim nodded.

“It’s as I said,” Eedrah went on. “The relyimah were all inoculated. I don’t know whether that was so for the P’aarli. Maybe not.”

“And the Terahnee?”

Eedrah closed his eyes. “I keep seeing it, Marrim. Two hundred million dead. Not to speak of the relyimah. What is it? What in the Maker’s name is this cursed thing?”

At the far end of the infirmary a door opened and two figures stepped inside.

“Catherine!” Eedrah sat forward, even as Marrim straightened up and went across, threading her way between the pallets that now covered the entire floor.

Atrus, too, had straightened and, turning, had seen Catherine and had begun to make his way across to her. They met close by the doorway.

She stared at Atrus, a strange expression in her eyes. “I think we had better talk.”

“Then talk.”

“Not here.

Atrus blinked, surprised, then nodded. “Okay. We’ll speak in Hersha’s room.”

§

“This isn’t a disease,” she said. “At least, not in its natural form.”

“Catherine?”

“Harmless bacteria,” she said. “That’s what’s doing this. They live in our stomachs.”

“I don’t follow you…Harmless? Then why…”

Atrus’s voice dropped away. There was a tiny motion of understanding in his face. When he spoke again, the words were almost a whisper. “D’ni bacteria, you mean. Harmless to *us* as we’ve become immune to it over the years.”

“But not to the relyimah.”

“Nor the P’aarli, it seems.”

“They have it, too?”

Atrus nodded, yet it was clear he was in shock. He shook his head. “*We* brought this thing here. *We* released it. The Maker help us!”

“Brought what?” Eedrah asked. He had come in silently.

Catherine turned, a slightly guilty look on her face, but Atrus faced the matter squarely.

“The sickness. It came from D’ni.”

Eedrah stared, shocked.

“It’s a stomach bacteria,” Catherine explained. “Harmless to us, harmful to the relyimah.”

“And to the Terahnee,” Eedrah said.

“The Terahnee?” Atrus sat forward. “Is your father ill?”

“And my brother…” Eedrah stopped and looked down, for the first time close to tears. Taking control of himself again, he looked back at Catherine. But there was no sign of hope in Catherine’s face.

“We cannot cure this, Eedrah.”

“Then we all must suffer.”

“We shall do what we can,” Atrus said. “We shall bring in help from D’ni to tend and nurse the sick. Some will die.”

“Yes,” Eedrah said, a flicker of bitterness in his face. Then that was gone. “Yes,” he said, more clearly.

Catherine, noting suddenly how drawn and pale Eedrah looked, reached out and gently held his arms. “Let us get you to a bed. I shall have Marrim come and nurse you.”

Eedrah smiled gratefully, yet there was a bleakness in his eyes—the bleakness of realization.

Atrus sighed. He seemed, in those moments, to have aged a hundred years. “I am so sorry, Eedrah. If I had known…”

But Catherine shook her head. “You were not to know, Atrus. You made your choice on reasonable grounds.”

“I do not believe that. I made a choice and my choice was wrong. Now millions must suffer.”

“But Atrus…”

“No,” he said, standing and walking round the desk, his face like stone.

“Atrus!” Catherine called after him. “Atrus!” But Atrus was gone; vanished into the darkness of the tunnels.

§

The great boat glided slowly around the curve of the river, then slid beneath the bridge, Ro’Jethhe’s house directly ahead of it.

In tunnels that ran parallel to the waterway, beneath and to either side of it, two teams of slaves pulled on the great ropes, four to a rope, dragging the boat along, the occasional spillage of water cascading down over them from the partially sealed slot above their heads.

Silently they strained, maintaining the even walking pace that kept the boat in motion, while behind each team a single steward jogged along, carried in a sturdy four-man palanquin.

Up above, the boat eased its way beneath the massive walls of Jethhe Ro’Jethhe’s house and into the central space. As it did, the slaves abruptly reversed direction, moving with practiced ease. For an instant the

great ropes were slack, and then they took the strain once more, slowing the boat smoothly to a standstill.

Exhausted, most of the slaves fell silently to the floor even as a number of them secured the ropes.

Up above, four men, wearing official cloaks and pendants of office, stepped out onto the unswept marble, surprised to find no one there to greet them.

"Ro'Jethhe?" one of them called, looking to his companions and frowning. "Jethhe Ro'Jethhe?"

A door opened on the far side of the concourse and a figure stumbled out; a scarecrow of a man, wearing stained and ragged clothing, his hair unkempt. Slowly it came toward them, limping and hopping by turns.

Closer, they saw that it was indeed a man.

"Ro'Jethhe?" the first messenger queried, astonished by the sight that met his eyes.

But the disheveled-looking figure did not answer. Instead, he turned and looked about him squintingly, as though he could not understand who he was or what he was doing there. His face was smeared with dirt and with what looked like tears and his hair hung in clumps.

"Ro'Jethhe? What has happened here? Have you been attacked?"

The scarecrow laughed and hopped, its eyes flickering from side to side in a manic, feverish fashion.

"Ro'Jethhe," it said, parrotlike. "I *am* Ro'Jethhe."

Again the chief messenger glanced to his companions, then he took a long silver tube from within his cloak and offered it to the scarecrow.

"If you *are* Jethhe Ro'Jethhe, then I am commanded by the king, Ro'Eh Ro'Dan, to place this official edict in your hands."

Ro'Jethhe took the tube and stared at it, blinking and squinting, incomprehension in his eyes. "Ro," he said quietly. Then, enjoying the game: "Ro! Ro! Ro-ro!"

"Gentlemen!"

The four men turned as one, to face another, younger man; pallid and clearly ill, yet neatly dressed, his hair combed back, his manner apparently quite normal.

"Forgive my father," the younger man said, approaching them, "but he is not himself. There is a sickness…"

The four men looked to each other, concerned.

"A plague, it seems," Eedrah went on, enjoying the discomfort of the king's men. "There is no defense against it. Already many here have died."

At that the four men blanched. Quickly they went into a huddle, discussing the matter in a low urgent murmur. There were nods of agreement and then their spokesman turned to Eedrah once again.

"Our task here is fulfilled, Ro'Jethhe's son. The king's message has been safely and properly delivered, therefore there is no need for us to stay. We are certain your father will obey the king's instructions to the fullest."

Eedrah looked beyond them to where his father stood, as if frozen, staring at the silver tube in his hand as if his eyes had been glued to the sight.

"It will find you," Eedrah said solemnly, wiping the perspiration from his brow, "*wherever* you run to!"

"It is the prophecy!" one of them said in a harsh whisper, but the others quickly hushed him, even as the first of them stepped back on board the boat. Quickly the others followed.

The chief messenger stared at Eedrah, then raised his hands and clapped them together.

There was a moment's delay—an awkward moment—and then the boat began to move.

Eedrah watched them leave, then, walking round the central pool, stepped up to his father and took the tube from his hand.

For a moment he stood there, feeling the sunlight on his face and arms, and wondered whether he would ever experience that again, then he cracked open the tube and took the sealed message from within.

It was as he'd feared. The king had ordered that all of the D'ni, including the ahrotahntee, be chained up and brought back to the capital to be tried in secret for their heresies.

Rolling the scroll up again, Eedrah slipped it back in the tube, capped it, then, smiling bleakly, tossed it into the water.

So much for kings and edicts. So much of heresies. They were all equal now, masters and servants, Terahnee and relyimah. Death would come for them all, whatever cloak they wore or did not wear, whatever their eyes could see or not see.

He looked to his father, saddened. His brother Hadre was already dead, taken in his bed, and now Jethhe Ro'Jethhe had gone, leaving in his place this fool in his disheveled clothes—this babbling madman with his staring eyes and sickly flesh.

He reached out, taking his father's hand, then slowly led him back across the square and through the door, inside, to where his deathbed waited.

§

The long day passed, and as the sun began to set, Atrus climbed the steps up out of the darkness of the slaves' quarters and, his D'ni lenses pulled down to protect his eyes, crossed the sunlit lawn and up into the silent house.

After the meeting with Catherine and Eedrah he had walked for some while, eaten up by the thought that this was all *his* fault; this whole tragedy had been caused by *his* impetuosity. He kept seeing old Tergahn's face, telling him to burn the Books and seal up the chambers again. But he had known better.

He walked and walked; then, after a time, feeling much calmer and knowing that there was nothing else for him to do, he had returned to the infirmary and carried on his work tending to the sick. There Catherine had come to him and, holding him briefly, had told him of Ro'Jethhe's death. Eedrah, meanwhile, slept, a milder form of the fever settled on him.

Now, as he climbed the long, curving steps to the room he shared with Catherine, Atrus wondered what was left for him to do here. Exhausted as he was, he saw it clearly. This world was dying, and there was nothing they could do now but alleviate the discomfort of some of these poor wretches in their final hours.

So much for his great plan of unifying D'ni and Terahnee. It was as Eedrah had said, what happens happens, and what are a man's petty plans in the face of that?

For the first time in his life he almost believed in fate. Yet still a small part of him argued against it. Life surely had no meaning unless a man was free to *choose* his fate, to mold it and fashion it according to his nature.

“I am too tired,” he said aloud as he stepped into his room. “Too tired and befuddled.”

He peeled off his shirt and threw it down, then turned, hearing a noise behind him in the room.

“Marrim?”

His young helper was slumped over the bed. The sight made him start. Then he remembered. They were not affected.

Yes, but she is not D’ni…

He hurried across, worried now. What if she was ill of the sickness? But her soft snoring made him understand. She was not ill, she was asleep.

Atrus smiled and made to turn away, then stopped, a strange little ripple going up his spine. The slave-child Marrim had been tending was awake, his dark eyes staring straight at Atrus. They blinked, then looked away.

“Child?”

At once the boy slipped under the covers, hiding himself.

“It’s all right,” Atrus said, walking round to the head of the bed. “I won’t harm you, child. I promise.”

But the child would not emerge again. He trembled beneath the sheets like a trapped young animal.

Hersha, Atrus decided. *I shall bring Hersha. He will know what to do*. Then, turning, he hurried from the room, hope mounting in him for the first time in all that long, dark day.

§

While Hersha talked quietly to the child, distracting him, Catherine took the sample from his arm.

It was not that the child fought to evade the needle, it was just that he was trembling so much that it was hard for Catherine to keep the needle still. Marrim had to help her keep that emaciated limb from shaking itself apart.

Then it was done and, while Catherine put the sample into her case and clicked it shut, Marrim reached out and clasped the slave-child to her, hugging him tightly.

Slowly the trembling ceased. Slowly the child calmed down again.

Marrim smiled and looked to Hersha, who was staring at her in astonishment. “What is his name?” she asked.

“His name?”

“Yes. He has one, surely? Or did the Terahnee simply number them all?”

“No…His name is Uta.”

“Uta…” Marrim moved back a little, trying to look into the boy’s face, but however she moved, he would position his face so it could not be properly seen.

“Even in one so young the conditioning is strong,” Catherine said, seeing what was going on. ‘It will take some while to change that.”

“But at least now it *can* be changed,” Atrus said. “At least the relyimah have some hope.”

“And the others?” Marrim asked.

“We shall know soon,” Catherine answered. “I have taken a sample of Ro’Jethhe’s blood, and of Eedrah’s, too. If we can discover what it is that allows some to survive this and makes others succumb, then perhaps I might find something that will help.”

“Then go at once,” Atrus said.

As Catherine hurried from the room, Marrim turned back to the child. “Well, young Uta. You give us all hope.”

But the child said nothing. As he had done all his infant life, Uta looked away, his body hunched into itself as he tried not to be seen.

§

Horen Ro’Jadre lay in his great bath, on his back, where death had found him, his mouth open in an “Oh” of surprise. His P’aarli stewards had fled that afternoon, when news had first come of the sickness that was sweeping the south. But they ran in vain, for they had long ago been caught by the strange bacteria that now crawled and multiplied unseen inside them all.

Yet death, for now, moved at a walking pace—or, to be more accurate, at the pace of a slowly gliding boat. Eight days was the gestation period for this sickness. Eight days before a mild disorder became fierce

cramps and then, with a suddenness that often killed, something much worse.

Master and slave succumbed. And the P'aarli, first to flee, were taken in the fields, or in some well-trimmed field of exotic blooms, their groans alone distinguishing them from the silent acquiescence of those they had once beaten and killed.

Across the whole land the sickness was spreading now. News of it had come to the capital, where Ro'Eh Ro'Dan, uncertain yet how serious it was, took advice from ancients who had known no illness in their long and worthless lives.

"If slaves are dying," the old men counseled, "then bring in more from the Ages. Replace their numbers."

It seemed a simple and effective policy. But the new slaves were not trained. Could they be counted on to be obedient?

"No matter," the old men said. "Slaves are slaves. They will obey."

But some did not. And as word of the sickness spread among the relyimah, so one or two among their number took it upon themselves to exact swift vengeance on those who had afflicted them with years of misery.

One such was a slave named Ymur. As his overseer raised his whip to beat Ymur, the slave grabbed the P'aarli's wrist and, twisting it, snapped the bone.

There was a cry of pain, silenced in an instant. And as the others stared at the fallen corpse of their tormentor, so Ymur looked about him, allowing his eyes to see what they had never properly focused on before.

"Come," he said, gesturing to them. And, obedient as slaves, they followed.

§

Many more days passed, and slowly the pattern became clearer. Many of the relyimah were dying, but only those who were too weak to survive the first full shock of the sickness. The majority survived and, within weeks, were on their feet again. Among the Terahnee and the P'aarli, however, the death rate was higher. Some, like Eedrah, survived,

but a great number succumbed. Thus it was that Eedrah had buried his father, mother, and three of his sisters.

He was sitting alone in the great library, writing, when Hersha came to him.

At first Hersha had found it uncomfortable—one might even say frightening—coming into the main house. Old he was, and well read, yet he was still relyimah, and from childhood had been taught to be invisible. Now he had a new fate.

"Eedrah…"

Eedrah looked up, a slightly glazed expression in his eyes. At Atrus's suggestion he had begun to write down his feelings, hoping thus to purge them, or at least to understand what he was undergoing.

"Yes, Hersha?"

"Forgive me for disturbing you, but important news has come. There is to be a meeting."

"A meeting?"

"Of the relyimah. At least, of their leaders. I have been asked to attend. It is to be held at the great mound, in Gehallah district."

Eedrah stared at the old man, then set his pen aside. There was something strange about Hersha's manner.

"Hersha? What is it you're not telling me?"

The old man looked down. "You see right through me, Renyaloth."

That use of his nickname among the relyimah—"the sickly one"—told him he had been right. Whatever this was, Hersha was finding it difficult telling him. Eedrah knew he would have to coax it from him.

"So what is the purpose of this meeting?"

Hersha's ancient head tucked itself even deeper into his chest, old reflexes taking control. "They mean to overthrow the Masters."

"Ah…" It ought not to have been a shock. After all, what was there to overthrow now that many of them were dead or dying? But for the relyimah to think like this was unheard of, and Eedrah found himself not surprised but actually astonished by the news.

"Is this a warning, Hersha? Are you telling me that I should leave Terahnee? Go back with Atrus, possibly?"

Hersha's eyes flicked up briefly before he averted them again. Eedrah saw how he steeled himself to speak again, and when he did it was another shock.

“I want you to come with me,” Hersha said quietly. “To speak to them, persuade them not to act too rashly.”

“*Speak* to them?”

Eedrah sat there, astonished. And say what? he thought. That we treated you abominably, but not to punish us for that?

He sighed. “Let me consider it, Hersha. And let me speak with Atrus. Then I shall tell you whether I will come with you or not.”

Hersha gave a little bow. “As you wish, Renyaloth.” And, without another word, the old man turned and scuttled away, hunched into himself, his eyes glancing from side to side as if he expected at any moment to be waylaid by stewards for his impertinence.

§

“Any luck?” Atrus asked, looking over Catherine’s shoulder at the page she was writing.

“None at all,” she answered, finishing the sentence she had been writing, then looking up at him. “Not that it matters now. If what Hersha has heard is true, then there is not a corner of this land that has not been ravaged by the sickness.”

Atrus nodded somberly. “It seems almost like a judgment.”

Catherine hesitated, as if about to say something, then nodded. “Eedrah certainly thinks so.” She looked past Atrus to where Uta sat in the corner chair, hunched into himself, trying not to be noticed. “I just wonder how the relyimah will cope. There’s food for now, but when that runs out, what then?”

“They grew it,” Atrus said.

“Yes, but that was when there was someone there to organize them. You’ve seen them, Atrus. Without someone to tell them what to do, they’re lost. They’re not mindless, I know that, but they sometimes act as if they are. Our problem is getting round that conditioning before they starve. We need to get them to make decisions for themselves.”

Atrus nodded, but both of them knew that it was easier said than done. How did one change not just a lifetime’s habits but long millennia of custom? Yet there must be one or two of these relyimah who could be used

—molded—to shape the new society that must emerge from this disaster. But where would they be found?

Eedrah, it seemed, had the answer. “Atrus,” he said, coming into the room. “I have a problem. The slave leaders are to have a great meeting, it seems. Tonight, at sunset, at the great mound in Gehallah.”

“Is that far from here?”

“Two hours’ walk, at most.”

“And what is to be discussed at this meeting?”

“The overthrow of the Masters.” Eedrah smiled bleakly. “By which I take it they mean the wholesale slaughter of survivors.”

“You think they’d do that?” Atrus asked, surprised.

Eedrah nodded. “Some have already done so, killing P’aarli and Masters both. They did not wait, it seems, for the sickness to descend.”

“And is Hersha to attend this meeting?”

“Yes, and he has asked me to go with him and speak to them.”

“So will you go?”

“If you will come with me, Atrus. I know them, true, but I am no speaker. Not as you are.”

“And you think I can convince them to act decently?”

“If anyone can.”

Atrus considered a moment. “All right. I shall come with you. But first I must return to D’ni. There is something there I need.”

“Will you be long, Atrus?”

Atrus smiled. “No, not long. Three hours, maybe four at most.” He turned, looking to the boy. “Uta! Come, my little shadow!”

The boy jerked, then, burying his head into his neck, he stood.

“Until then,” Eedrah said.

“Until then.”

§

Ro’Eh Ro’Dan stood at the edge of the high platform and looked outward. Beneath him the land of Terahnee stretched away into the distance, swathed in the late afternoon mist. From this height it seemed eternal and unchanged, but he knew better. There was not a household down there that had not been touched.

“The bricks alone will stand on that day, / And the blind shall be given eyes.”

He said the words softly, almost in a whisper. Ro’Addarren, his chief adviser, had read them to him only that morning from the ancient book, and now the old man was dead.

“So they were true, after all,” he said, and almost laughed, remembering how excited they all had been when they had heard of the tragedy that had struck D’ni, and how they had thought that *that* was what had been prophesied. Well, now they knew.

But knowing did not help them any.

From far below there came a hammering. He turned, staring down into the depths, and saw the great host at the Valley Gate and knew, without needing to be told, that this was the rabble of new slaves they had brought in from the Ages.

“So be it,” he said, no longer caring about his own personal fate. What did it matter if he died? He was king of nothing now.

But others would not let him succumb to fate. As he stood there, two of his ancient counselors ventured out onto the platform, clearly afraid of the great drop. Their eyes went from Ro’Eh Ro’Dan to the platform’s edge constantly, while they themselves stayed close to the top of the steps.

“You must come, my lord,” one of them said, beckoning to him as if to a child.

“Your boat is awaiting you,” the other added. “If we leave now…”

He sighed, then walked across to them. It was no use arguing. Besides, maybe he was wrong. Maybe once this rabble was dispersed they could rebuild. From what he’d heard many of the slaves were still alive, and they, certainly, would need organizing.

“All right,” he said, letting them usher him down the steps and through his room, out onto the narrow bridge. He was halfway across when some instinct told him to stop and turn, and as he looked back, he saw himself, in memory, greeting the stranger.

I liked him, he realized. I really rather liked him.

“Master!” the old men said, trying to hurry him along. “Master, we must be gone from here!”

He shook his head, trying to clear it of the memory, but still he could see them both, cloaked against the coolness of the early morning,

and smiled. It made no sense to like the man after all that had happened, and yet he did.

I see you, Atrus. Then, conscious of the old men fussing all about him, he hurried on toward the waiting boat.

§

Atrus stepped from the ruins, the heavy pack on his back, and, adjusting his lenses, turned to look as Oma and Esel stepped out behind him. They, too, carried the big-framed backpacks. Behind them came the slave-child, Uta, and finally Master Tergahn.

As Atrus turned back, Tamon hurried up. “Atrus! Something’s happening! There are great plumes of smoke in the distance!”

They hurried across to the chairlift. From its upper platform a clear view of Terahnee could be had.

Atrus scanned the distance, then looked back. Tergahn was watching him. “You must listen to me, Atrus,” the old man said. “You did not before and look what happened. We must pull our people out and destroy the Books. Yes, and seal up the Temple, too, for if the relyimah find the Temple they will link through and destroy us all.”

Atrus nodded. “I hear you, Master Tergahn. But I must take this one chance to make amends.” He looked to Tamon. “Master Tamon, if you do not hear from us in two days, you will do as Master Tergahn says. You will dismantle the chairlift and return to D’ni, destroying the Linking Books. Then you will seal the GreatTemple.”

“But Atrus…”

“No arguments, Master Tamon. Tergahn is right. We do not know how the relyimah will act, and we cannot risk our own people. Two days is sufficient to do what I must do. If I fail, I shall have failed by then, and D’ni will be in danger. Indeed, it might be well to post lookouts.”

Tamon frowned, clearly dismayed by this turn of events. Even so, he bowed his head obediently. “I shall do as you say.”

“Good.” Atrus reached out, taking his old friend’s hands. “I hope it will not come to that.”

“And I,” Tamon said. “Good luck, Atrus, and hurry back.”

Atrus smiled. “I shall do my best, Master Tamon.” Then, signaling to Esel and Oma and young Uta to join him on the chair, he climbed aboard, his eyes going outward to the tall dark plumes that climbed the distant sky.

PART SEVEN

DESCENDING THE GREAT LADDER OF TIME. WE SEE

FOUR FACES. THE FACES OF FOUR WOMEN.

AGED AND DEAD THE FIRST TWO ARE.

THE THIRD. A DREAMER. THE LAST. A TEACHER.

--FROM THE VISIONS OF JD’IRIMAH.

CANTO 157

The sun was just setting as Hersha and his party made their way up the long, sloping ramp and onto the great mound of Gehallah.

There the relyimah were gathered, over twenty thousand strong, the uniformity of their dress and their shaven heads emphasized by the utter silence in which they stood.

A canopy of golden silk had been placed at the center of that massive amphitheater, and in the last rays of the sun four banners—purest black—hung limply. Beneath that canopy a smaller group was gathered. It was toward them that Hersha now headed, Eedrah and Atrus behind him, the others—Oma, Esel, Uta, and two other relyimah—several paces back.

“Hersha,” one of them said, as the old man stepped up onto the platform, a greeting that was quickly taken up by the others there.

“Friends,” Hersha said. “I have come at your summons.”

“And brought others with you, I see,” another of them said, stepping out from where he had been standing at the back.

Hersha looked about him for clarification, clearly not recognizing the man who had spoken.

"I am Ymur," the man said, hesitantly yet at the same time belligerently. "I am leader of the relyimah of Ro'Tanak."

Hersha frowned. "I thought Rafis was their leader."

"He was," Ymur said humorlessly. "And now I am."

Atrus, looking on from just beneath the platform, saw how all but Hersha found it hard to meet each other's eyes. It was as Catherine had said; it was hard for these men, even the boldest among them, to throw off their conditioning. They could not change overnight. Yet they might break altogether under the strains of the new demands on them, and if they did, then there would almost certainly be bloodshed.

"Who are these *strangers?*" Ymur asked.

Hersha turned to one of the others, an old slave, and asked, "Have I to answer to this newcomer, Baddu?"

Baddu looked uncomfortable. "It might be best, Hersha. Eedrah we know, of course, and welcome as a friend, but the others…"

"Are friends also," Hersha said. "They are ahrotahntee."

There were looks of surprise at that, for all there had taken Atrus and his fellows for Masters. But Ymur was not convinced.

"Are these not the ones who went to see the Terahnee king?"

"That is so," Hersha answered.

"Then they have no place here at this gathering." Ymur looked about him threateningly, then raised his voice. At the sound of it many of those closest to him cowered. "Hear me, brother relyimah. No friend of the Terahnee can be a friend of ours."

"That is not so," Hersha began, but Ymur spoke over him.

"It is said that they made a pact."

"That is untrue," Hersha said.

Ymur stepped forward, confronting Hersha. "Are you calling me a liar, old man?"

Hersha dropped his gaze. "You heard wrong, that is all. No pact was made. These *are* our friends."

"So they would have you believe!" Ymur said disdainfully. He turned his back on Hersha. "Myself, I will not hear them."

"Just as others would not *see* you, Ymur?"

The speaker stepped from the darkness at the back of the platform, his thin cloak rustling about him.

"Gat!" The whispered name rippled through the thousands gathered in the growing darkness. *"Gat!"*

The ancient stopped amid those gathered at the center. He was older even than Hersha and his hair was white and long. Hersha had mentioned his name reverently many times, but Atrus had always assumed that the man was legend, buried long ago. Yet here he was, as large as life; a strong, vigorous-looking old man.

"Well, Ymur?"

And as Gat turned to face the younger man, Atrus realized with a shock that he was blind.

Ymur had hunched into himself, his head tucked down, like a beaten dog. "But they are not relyimah," he grumbled.

"Maybe so," the ancient said, "yet we would do well to listen to what they have to say."

From Ymur's expression he clearly did not like this, but he was not going to argue with Gat. He gave a grudging nod.

"Good, then light the lamps and let's begin. There is much to be said this night."

§

In the glare of the flickering lamps—real lamps, burning in cressets—Gat stepped to the front of the platform and began to speak.

"I remember my father and my mother, and I can recall quite vividly the day that I was taken from them. Blind as I am, I can still see the pain in their eyes. Terahnee did that. Terahnee and the servants of Terahnee. And I vowed that day that I would never forgive them for what they did. That I would fight them to the last—here *inside* me."

Gat tapped his chest, then paused, his blind eyes searching about him. "Like you I have pretended to be nothing. To bleed and suffer and be silent. To exist for work and yet not to exist at all. To live without love or recognition. All this I did, not choosing to do so, but because I had no choice and found that the force of life in me was stronger than the desire

for death. It is that which makes a slave. That choice, when all other choices are denied, to carry on."

Gat leaned toward them, lowering his voice slightly, as if speaking personally to each one of them. "But now the Masters are gone, it seems. Swept away. And we are free."

He smiled blindly. "Look about you. *Dare* to look about you. See those who have suffered with you. Meet their eyes and see the pain there that all here have endured."

Atrus, looking about him, saw how some of the relyimah risked tiny glances at their fellows; but most looked down, ashamed, still locked in the prison of habit.

Gat, blind as he was, seemed to comprehend this, and now his voice softened. "Oh, it is hard, brothers. Perhaps the hardest thing we have ever had to do; to shake off our bonds and be ourselves, not some other man's *thing*. But we must learn to use our eyes anew. To see each other and thus *cease* to be relyimah. It will take time. Perhaps even a long time. But we must make that journey to seeing. To *being* seen. And while we do, we must be patient. Patient, because it would be unwise to act rashly and hot-bloodedly. That path can bring us only more grief, more injustice. The past is past. We must let go of the hatred and bitterness we feel. And so I counsel you, my brothers. To look and see and be calm."

And with that Gat turned away, stepping back into the darkness.

Next to speak was Ymur. He came to the front of the platform, self-conscious and ill at ease now that he must address the multitude.

"Brothers," he began. "Gat speaks wisely. Like us, he has suffered. Like us, he has known what it is to be nothing. I say that no man who has not suffered that can speak of it."

As he said the words, Ymur turned, looking pointedly at Atrus and Eedrah and their party.

"And so we listen to Gat. As now you listen to Ymur, who suffered and was nothing. Who, like you, is relyimah. And I say that I, too, remember the day I was taken from my home. I remember how my father fought the P'aarli and was killed for his pains. And I, too, took a vow that day."

Ymur paused. As he spoke, his voice had grown louder and more confident. Now he seemed to swell with every word, a burning anger

behind his every utterance—an anger, Atrus saw, that touched many in that great crowd.

"Gat says the past is past. But is that really so? Are all the Masters dead? No. Some live. And while they live, will they not be tempted to return to how things were? Will they not bring men from other Ages to subdue us once again? Who here would dare to say no?"

He paused, a snarl on his features now. "The truth is this. We *know* what the Terahnee are. The scars on our bodies tell us. So, too, the chains in our heads. Gat speaks of learning to use our eyes. He is right. But first we must see the threat the Terahnee still pose. Gat says we are free, but we are not free. Not until the last Terahnee child is dead."

There was a murmur from the gathering at that—both shocked surprise and vehement agreement. And Atrus, hearing it and looking about him, understood at once. Whatever Gat had said about learning to be themselves, *this* was the single issue that divided the relyimah.

Ymur spoke on, a cold vehemence in his words now; their former anger transformed into a chilling certainty.

"If any of you still doubt, look back. Remember what was done to you. Not once or twice, but every day for all your lives. Unseen we were. Well, I for one will pluck their eyes from their heads!"

And with that he turned and strode into the darkness, leaving behind him a crowd that now seethed and murmured, like a great soup that had been brought almost to the boil.

"May I speak?"

Baddu had stepped forward, meaning to address the gathering. Now he turned, looking to the speaker. It was Eedrah.

"Eedrah?" Baddu said, surprised and perhaps embarrassed after what had just been said.

"Let him speak," Gat said from the darkness. "Unless Ymur wishes to pluck out the eyes of one who is our friend."

There was fierce murmuring at that. Baddu looked down, then nodded.

"Thank you," Eedrah said, stepping to the front of the platform. He looked about him, clearly nervous, then began, his eyes pleading for the relyimah to listen.

"Ymur is right. My people do not deserve to live. They were cruel and self-obsessed. No words of mine can wash away the shame I feel." He

turned, looking to Gat. “Indeed, I would give my own eyes were it to help.”

He turned back. “And Ymur is right about one other thing. Were enough Terahnee to survive, they would surely try to make things as they were. For they know no different, and even this great tragedy, this *judgment* as it seems, will not make them see. Which is to say, I understand you, Ymur. I cannot feel precisely what you feel, for I have not suffered as you have suffered, yet I can *imagine* how it feels. And, imagining it, I can understand the desire for vengeance that burns in you.”

Eedrah paused. “I understand it, yet part of me holds out against that path. We have had enough of violence. Enough of kill or be killed. Our way must lie in another direction. Besides, there are more important issues to be debated. How, for instance, are we to feed the relyimah? And how should we direct their energies now that Terahnee has fallen?”

This was too much for Ymur. Stepping out into the center of the platform, he began to harangue Eedrah.

“What has that to do with you, Terahnee? We shall feed ourselves, yes, and choose our own leaders. You think to control us with clever words, no doubt, but I for one am not fooled.”

“A fool is never fooled,” Gat said, walking across to Eedrah’s side. “Or so he claims. But you, Ymur, speak ill of one who has often proved his worth. Eedrah is right. We must think of more than killing. We must consider how our freedom should be used, not just now but in the future also.”

Ymur bristled. “I say once more. Destroy the Terahnee. Then we can go home.”

“*Home?*” Gat shook his head sadly. “Do you not understand, Ymur? This *is* our home. The question is, what are we to make of it?”

“You have a plan?” Ymur sneered.

“Not I,” Gat answered him, “but I understand there is one here who might offer us a way to follow.” Gat turned, looking in Atrus’s direction. “Atrus of D’ni. Would you step forward now and speak to the relyimah?”

Atrus stepped up, conscious of the watchful yet unwatching crowd surrounding him. Silent they were, like a great army of the dead.

“What has happened here is a great tragedy,” he began. “Many of your people have died, and many more will die before this scourge has passed. So it was in my own Age of D’ni. Yet no two things are ever quite

alike, and D’ni was not Terahnee. This world, which so bewitched me at first sight, I see now was corrupt and wicked. Corrupted to the core by those given the responsibility to lead. As Eedrah said, its makers deserved their fate. But that was not so for D’ni. My world—or I should rightly say, my *grandfather’s* world—was a world of order and fairness, as unlike to this as the rock is to the air. It was a world of fixed and certain laws, where every man was treated with the respect and dignity he deserved. We had no slaves, no stewards. There were no beatings in our world, no deaths—unless by accident or natural cause. Each man was seen for what he was, and given recognition for his talents.”

“So you say,” Ymur said, interrupting him. “But I say you made a pact with the Terahnee. I say you meant to bring your people here and settle in Terahnee.”

Atrus shrugged. “That is true, but…”

“There!” Ymur said. “What did I say!” Turning away, he went to the edge of the platform. “Well, brothers? Are we to swap one set of masters for another?”

“This is not mastery!” Atrus exclaimed. “Unless you call it mastery of oneself. I do not wish to rule you, Ymur, just give you guidance.”

“So you say. But I say that we relyimah will find our own way now. For too long have we listened to others and done what they have told us to do. Now it is *our* time, and we shall not be bound by masters’ ways.”

“It is not so!”

Ymur turned back, his face scornful. “Why should we listen to you, Atrus of D’ni?”

“Because I have your interests at heart!”

“*Our* interests, or *yours?*”

Atrus stared at Ymur, understanding suddenly that whatever he said he would not convince this one. Ymur was set against him, set against reason itself. And sadly, Ymur was not the only one, for his fiery words had once more ignited the dark mass of humanity gathered there before them.

He was about to turn and walk away, to take the books of law he had brought with him from D’ni and go home, when a figure moved past him to stand between himself and Ymur.

Ymur half-turned, sensing the presence of someone close beside him, then frowned. “Boy?”

Atrus took a step toward the child then stopped. Uta was trembling, yet there was something about his stance that warned Atrus not to interfere. The child had steeled himself to do this. He was hunched into himself, his head tucked tightly against his chest, yet his voice sounded clearly in the sudden silence.

“Y-you are…wr-wrong.”

“Wrong?” Ymur twitched his head back, as if someone had flicked him in the face. And then, unexpectedly, he laughed. “Go away, child. Let the elders speak.”

“You are wrong,” Uta repeated, no stammer this time. “Atrus *is* a friend. He found me when I was ill and nursed me. He carried me, not fearing for himself.”

But Ymur simply sneered. “Only because he knew he could not catch it.”

“Not then,” Hersha said. “Uta is right. Atrus acted as a brother, not fearing for himself. And his people helped tend our ill.”

Uta looked up into the old man’s face. Then, in a strange incantatory tone, he said:

“What ails the sickly child?
What stranger comes?
What words will follow him,
Spoken by sleeping tongues?”

Utter silence followed the words.

Atrus turned, sensing that something was happening in the crowd and saw, to his astonishment, that many now were looking at the platform, staring in awe at the child—yes, and at himself, too.

“What is it?” Atrus asked, looking at Eedrah. “What is going on?” But even Eedrah, it seemed, did not know.

One by one the relyimah were dropping to their knees, an awed whisper spreading across the great arena.

Up on the platform, Gat stepped past Atrus and raised his arms. Silence fell.

“We have heard enough,” he said, his voice trembled with a strange, inexplicable emotion. “It is decided. We shall learn this new law and embrace new ways. Ymur, is it not so?”

Atrus looked to Ymur, expecting the man to argue, but Ymur’s head had dropped in defeat. “It is so.”

§

As the relyimah dispersed to their encampments, their leaders went through the great arch at the back of the amphitheater and into the Chamber of the Moon.

Once water had tumbled in huge illuminated curtains from all sides of the great hall, but now those artificial falls were still, the curved surfaces of marble dull and dry. Behind them, glimpsed through the spaces between the bulky segments, twelve huge revolving “scoops”—six massive troughs of stone between two equally massive wheels; troughs that were designed to lift the water from the reservoirs below—sat idle now. The thick ropes trailing from the wheels lay slack, the leather harnesses empty.

Overhead the moon, a huge shield made of glittering crystal, rested where its last journey across those illusory heavens had brought it, the fierce blue-white light of a powerful lamp shining through it onto the floor a hundred feet below.

But Atrus barely noticed anything of this. As the great doors closed on them, he turned, looking to the child.

“Uta…what were those words you spoke just now?”

Uta, startled by Atrus’s request, glanced at Gat, then tucked his head into his chest.

“Gat?” Atrus asked, turning to the old man.

“Those were lines from the *Korokh Jimah*.”

“The Book of prophecies?”

“So it is sometimes known.”

“Your people seemed to attribute some significance to the words.”

“Words spoken by sleeping tongues.” Gat smiled. “The D’ni books of law seem to fit that description well, would you not say, Atrus? Not to speak of the ailing child.”

“Most anything would fit.” Atrus shook his head. “Well, let us move on to more important matters.” He stopped, looking about him at the small group who were gathered there. “Where is Ymur?”

“Gone,” Hersha said. “I saw him leave.”

“Ymur is quite hotheaded,” Atrus said. “It might be best to have him watched.”

“You think him a danger?” Hersha asked.

“His is a single voice,” Gat answered. “He might be angry, but he will not challenge the word of the relyimah council.”

“Maybe so, but you need to find a task for him. Something to harness all that anger.”

“You could be right, Atrus. We shall consider the matter. But tell me…these laws of yours…they can be adapted for the relyimah?”

Atrus smiled. “I have no doubt of it. Indeed, I shall begin the task at once. But I shall need help copying out the resultant passages. Are there any among the relyimah who could help us in the task?”

Gat laughed. “Thousands. You think those lazy good-for-nothings, the Terahnee, would lower themselves to undertake such hard and difficult work?”

“Then I shall have my companions, Oma and Esel, help me make a suitable translation of the laws, to be copied and disseminated.”

“And we shall appoint those among us who seem suitable to act as teachers of these new laws.” Gat paused. “But there are other, far more pressing problems.”

“Food,” Hersha said.

“Food? But food is plentiful.”

“Now it is. But unless the fields are harvested, the fruit picked from the trees, and the animals tended to, then we shall very quickly have a problem. Since the sickness came, almost nothing has been done.”

“I see.” Atrus considered a moment. “And the problem is getting them to work again?”

“Not at all,” Baddu said. “There is a will among the relyimah to work. But many have died, and without the stewards…”

“Our people feel lost,” Gat said. “Without direction. Oh, they hated and despised their masters, yes, and their masters’ servants, but now that they are gone they find they also needed them.”

“I understand,” Atrus said, looking to Eedrah, who was strangely silent. “But that need will pass. They must be their own masters now. And we shall help them in that task.” He paused. “Each man knows his work, does he not?”

“They do.”

“Then that is what each will do.”

Gat frowned. “But who will arrange it all?”

“The relyimah. Eventually. But first they must return to their routines.” Atrus smiled. “I know what you are saying, Gat. They need someone to tell them what to do. But it is not true. Not entirely. They have only to act as if the stewards were still there—but unseen.”

There was surprise, then laughter at that.

“You mean, pretend?” Gat asked.

“Until a better system is devised. Until *real* changes can be made. But you are right…these basic tasks must be continued, for without them nothing will work.”

“Then so it will be,” Gat said, a beaming smile lighting his blind face. “But what of the women?”

“Women?” There was a look of consternation on Atrus’s face. “There are *female* relyimah?”

“Of course. Who do you think did most of the work in the great houses?”

“The men, I thought…”

He looked to Hersha, who shrugged. “I thought you knew, Atrus. They have their own quarters, far from the men’s quarters.”

“Segregated, you mean?”

But the word meant nothing to Hersha.

Atrus looked about him, seeing things anew. “And the two never meet?”

“Never,” Gat answered.

“And now?”

Gat looked away, embarrassed. “It is…difficult. More difficult than seeing and being seen. To even look at one was an offense for which a male relyimah might die.”

Atrus grimaced. “I didn’t…”

“See?” Eedrah said, breaking his long silence. “Oh, it was the worst of it, Atrus. Beside that, all other cruelties were bearable. But to

break *that* bond." He shuddered. "For that alone I agree with Ymur. If I were relyimah I would hunt my people down until the last of us was dead."

"Yourself included, Eedrah?"

Gat was staring blindly at Eedrah, astonished by the depth of bitterness he had displayed.

"I was but barely better than my fellows. I did nothing to persuade them they were wrong."

"You helped us, Eedrah," Hersha said, reaching out and actually touching the Terahnee.

Eedrah stared a moment at the place where Hersha's hand rested on his arm, then looked about him. Not a face condemned him. He closed his eyes, the pain he was feeling at that moment overwhelming him. "To live such a lie…some days it was unbearable."

"I understand," Gat said. "But now that all is done with, and you, my brother, you must help us find a better way."

Eedrah looked at the blind man, then bowed his head. "As you wish…my brother."

§

Back at the great house in Ro'Jethhe, Atrus sat down with Catherine, quickly confiding to her all that had happened at the assembly.

"There are *female* relyimah?" she asked, astonished.

"So they tell me. But Hersha says they are kept separate. Segregated. Apparently they were not even allowed to look at each other. On pain of death. And they are neutered—male and female both—just in case any should escape and hide away."

Catherine stared at him, horrified. "This changes everything."

"How so?"

"It's very simple. You wish to make a proper world of this, a real society, with good laws and fair treatment for all. But how can you create any kind of society when there are no children and no possibility of children?"

"Then we shall bring them in, from other Ages. Oh, not as the Terahnee brought them in, as slaves, but with their families."

"Do you think that will work?"

“I do not know. Yet we must try.” Atrus sat back, kneading his neck with one hand, tired now after the long day. “One thing I do know: This is an undertaking far larger than the rebuilding of D’ni ever was. But if the will is here—and I think it is—then we can make it work. And maybe we might settle here, after all. Be part of this.”

She smiled. “Maybe. But first you ought to send a messenger to Master Tamon, to tell him all is well.”

“I shall. At once.”

He stood and turned to go, but Catherine called him back. “Atrus? One other thing. Have you noticed…”

“Noticed?”

“Marrim and Eedrah. Have you noticed how they spend time with each other?”

§

Marrim poked her head around the door.

“So there you are. I’ve been looking for you everywhere.”

Eedrah sat at the desk on the far side of the library, a journal open in front of him. At the sound of her voice he had set his pen down. Now, as Marrim walked across, he sanded the page and closed the journal.

“Something you don’t want me to see?” she teased, coming up to the desk.

He looked back at her sullenly, then pushed the journal across the desk to her. “Look, if you want.”

“No,” she said, realizing she had hurt his feelings. “Are you all right?”

He looked to one side of her, then shook his head. “No, not really. I feel…” He looked straight at her. “I feel like I oughtn’t to have lived.”

“It’s what half the D’ni suffer from,” she said brightly. “So Catherine says.” Then, she spoke more seriously. “You don’t really feel like that, do you? I mean, I thought you wanted to help the relyimah.”

“I do.” Eedrah frowned, then stood up, walking halfway across that massive floor before he turned to look back at her. “Things were said tonight, at the assembly. There was this one relyimah called Ymur. A

disagreeable type, yet what he said brought it home to me. How evil it all was. And I felt that I'd permitted it somehow."

"You had no choice."

"Didn't I? You see, that's just it, Marrim. I used to argue that way, but now that it's all gone I can see clearly. It was *my* silence, the silence of people *like* me, that permitted it to continue. To carry on unchallenged. It was up to us, who *saw*, to *do* something. But we didn't. For thousands of years we just accepted it."

"But you didn't create Terahnee, Eedrah."

"No. That's true. I merely used it, like everyone else."

"I think you're being too hard on yourself."

He laughed bitterly. "Hard? I'm dying inside."

Eedrah looked down. "Do you remember the maze, Marrim, at Horen Ro'Jadre's house?"

"I remember beating you."

"Has Atrus told you how that worked?"

"No. Some kind of clever machinery, I suppose."

"You *suppose!*" He huffed out a breath. "Slaves did that, Marrim! Relyimah! Hundreds of them harnessed to great cogs and pulleys, straining to lift and turn those massive rooms. And if one fell, or slipped, he would be trampled by his fellows, because there was not time to stop. The rooms had to be turned. Twelve seconds they had, *remember?* Twelve seconds!"

Marrim was staring at him in shock.

"How does that make you feel, Marrim, knowing that your sport probably killed several young men?"

She stared, horrified.

"Yes, well, imagine feeling that each and every day of your life! Or worse. Imagine *numbing* yourself so that you could no longer feel!"

§

In the days that followed, they began to understand the scale of the problems facing them. Before the sickness Terahnee had been a land of two hundred million souls, not including the P'aarli and the silent relyimah—uncounted, naturally. Now the native population had

plummeted to less than a hundred thousand—ironically, those who, like Eedrah, had been sickliest among them. But now the slaves, that great unseen mass, had emerged into the sunlight, and even after their own losses, they numbered in excess of two billion souls.

It was a huge logistical problem, and one that not even Gat had properly understood. The old man busied himself, going from gathering to gathering, speaking to the local relyimah and talking of the "way ahead," but the practical details he left to Atrus and Eedrah.

Their first task was to organize a team of "scribes"—relyimah who could write and had experience of various nonmenial tasks. Word went out among the local estates, and very quickly they began to come, in twos and threes and just occasionally alone, making their way to the great house at Ro'Jethhe.

Master Tamon was given the job of bringing the D'ni survivors through and settling them in Terahnee, where they might aid Atrus and the others in the task of building the new social order.

Catherine, meanwhile, dedicated herself to the task of bringing together all of the slaves, both male and female. It could not be done hurriedly, not unless they wished to court disaster, for they were conscious that, as in so many spheres, the relyimah did not know how to behave socially. It was not something they had been taught; indeed, they had been positively discouraged from thinking of themselves as human beings with human emotions and human needs. But now they must, and the transition was not going to be easy. And so, for the while, a form of segregation was maintained.

And there was one other, perhaps more pressing, problem. The Terahnee Ages. It was like D'ni again, only this time the problem was increased a thousandfold. How many Books were there? And who was in them?"

Atrus's first instinct was to gather all the Books in, but was that really the answer? There were not enough of his own people to undertake the task, and he was not certain he could trust the relyimah to do it for him. Indeed, he wasn't even certain that they *knew* the difference between an ordinary book and one that linked with another Age. Besides, he had seen with his own eyes how large the Terahnee libraries were, and the thought of trying to bring back and then store what might possibly be several million Books was a daunting one. And that was not to speak of

searching them. Busy himself, he asked his young helpers, Carrad and Irras, to come up with a scheme.

Yet even as the problems mounted, there were successes. Atrus's plan to send the relyimah back to their individual tasks worked well. Most seemed happy to have something to do again and the need for supervision proved less pressing than might have been thought. But all knew that the situation could not be maintained forever. Changes would have to be made, and soon.

But Atrus's priority in those first few days was to give the relyimah laws and, with Oma's and Esel's help, he worked late into the night, reading and making notes from the six great volumes they had brought back from D'ni, ignoring what was specific to D'ni while attempting to frame a code of behavior, based on the core code of D'ni, that might serve the relyimah in the difficult times to come.

One problem Atrus was glad not to have to deal with was the aftermath of the sickness—the burning of the dead. That the relyimah took charge of, and for days the sky was filled, on every side, with great plumes of dark smoke. Under that pall, it might have been easy to despair, but there was hope, too. Hope that this greater freedom might prove permanent. Yet they must work hard if that was to be so.

On the fourth day after the gathering at Gehallah, Atrus called on Hersha and presented him with a Code of Law—a list of forty basic rights and responsibilities that could be understood by all and acted on at once. More detailed law would follow, Atrus said, but this was the essence of it. This was how the relyimah would henceforth govern themselves.

That very morning Oma and Esel began to organize the teams of relyimah scribes, setting up benches in the great library of Ro'Jethhe. By evening the first batch of a thousand copies were ready for distribution among the people. It was an enormous achievement and there was a general sense of euphoria.

Then word came that the body of the king had been found, and an hour later, even as night fell, Gat arrived to see Atrus, the torches of his guards lighting the way before him as he came up the ramp.

They embraced.

As Gat stood back his blank eyes flickered in the gusting flames of the lamps as if alive with vision.

“I want you to come with me, Atrus, to the capital. To bury the last king of Terahnee.”

“I will come.”

“Then let us go at once.”

Atrus turned, embracing Catherine briefly, then followed Gat back down the ramp toward the waiting boat.

§

As the first light of morning tinted the horizon, Atrus woke. Gat sat beside him in the boat, silent and, so it seemed, watchful.

Behind them the rowers—twelve young relyimah; volunteers, honored to serve the legendary Gat—kept their steady rhythm, drawing the long craft through the water. The sound was reassuring.

“You needed that,” Gat said, sensing that Atrus was awake. “Hersha says that you push yourself to the limit.”

“Hersha exaggerates. I like to work.”

“Yes, and we are grateful for it.” Gat turned his head and smiled. “But you must rest now. Besides, we need to talk, Atrus, and what better opportunity than this.”

Atrus sat up. “Are you uneasy, Gat?”

“A little. Oh, we are making real progress, but our greatest problems lie ahead of us, I fear. Your laws will help, yet it seems to me that simple habit is our greatest enemy.”

“Habit?”

“The habit of obedience and silence. The habit of not-being.” Gat turned his inert gaze fully on Atrus. “My people are like newborns. They do not know how to behave. But newborns are small and helpless and can be chastised by their parents. So it was among the Terahnee. But my newborns are large and muscular and—right now, at least—confused by the emotions they are feeling. Emotions they have always before held back, for fear of punishment or worse. Put simply, Atrus, they must learn how to live, and in doing so they will need all the guidance we can give them.”

“I agree. And the D’ni and their friends will help.”

Gat smiled again. “I know. Your friendship is most valued, Atrus. But think. Think just how many of us there are. Two thousand million. How do we set about teaching so many? How can we possibly keep such a host in check?”

“It worries you, Gat?”

“To be sure it worries me. Time is against us, Atrus. Right now they are obedient, with the learned obedience of their kind. But the more we give them of themselves, the more they will want, and the worse, perhaps, they’ll be.”

“Do you think so?”

“Were not the Terahnee men? Oh, they may have acted like uncaring monsters, but given other circumstances they, like Eedrah, could have been different. Kinder, certainly. And so with a host of newborns. My relyimah. When they learn to be seen, then their problems will really begin, for some will like what they see and some will not. Some, like Ymur, will be angry at the waste of their former lives, while others, thinking back on it, will sink into a despair so deep they will never emerge from it.”

Atrus sighed. “I had not thought…”

The old man reached out and held his shoulder. “You have been busy, Atrus. Nor can you think of everything.”

“Then what are we to do?”

“Reduce the numbers, maybe. You spoke to Hersha of the Books—the Ages the Terahnee wrote. Perhaps we might use some of them, for resettling our people.”

“It’s possible.”

“Then we should investigate that possibility. It has been in my mind that maybe we should send the women there.”

Atrus turned to him, surprised.

“Oh, I have been thinking long and hard about it, Atrus. Wondering if there might not be a peaceful way of dealing with the matter. Of bringing together those who have so long been apart.”

“And?”

Gat let out a long, slow breath. “I believe it would not work. Catherine, I know, is looking at this problem, and I will wait to hear what she has to say before we act, but my feeling is that there is no solution to this most singular problem. Not for this generation, anyway. To introduce

them to each other now might be to tear the fabric of our new society apart before it has had a chance to grow and prosper."

"But a society of men…"

"And families, and children."

Atrus frowned and looked down. "I do not like it, Gat. It would be too much like keeping things as they were. It would be…well, like denying the relyimah any kind of real normality."

"You think they *can* be normal, Atrus, after all they have suffered?"

"I believe that they should be given the chance to try, even if it ends in failure. Life isn't life without that risk."

Gat looked away a moment, then he nodded. "Sometimes I feel you are much wiser than you appear, Atrus."

Atrus laughed. "And how do I appear to you, my friend?"

"Like the voice of blind certainty itself."

§

As the sun rose higher and the landscape about them was revealed, they saw just how much damage the relyimah had wreaked upon it. Statues were smashed and many visual conceits destroyed entirely. This surprised Atrus, who had heard nothing of such activities. At the same time, he noted how most living things—the trees and flowers—were untouched, and this, as much as any other thing he'd seen, gave him hope.

Yet now that he knew what he was seeing, this landscape, which had seemed so wonderful when first he'd viewed it, so constantly surprising, now seemed merely desolate: a fragile artifice that had been shattered in an instant.

Like the Ages my father wrote…

"We should remove all this," he said, speaking to Gat for the first time in hours.

"Their playthings, you mean?"

"Yes, and their houses, too. All signs of what they were."

Gat smiled. "It would take forever."

"Yet we could make a start."

“Maybe.” The old man sat forward, gesturing toward the city, which now lay directly ahead of them. It had grown constantly these past few hours, dominating the skyline, more like a mountain than anything mere men had made. “But what of that? How would you begin to take *that* down?”

Atrus smiled. Sometimes it was almost as if the old man actually saw what he was looking at.

“Little by little.”

Gat’s laughter was gentle. “I can think of better things to do, can’t you?”

“You cannot live in the ruins of the past.”

“And yet you tried, Atrus.”

“Then maybe I was wrong.” And for the first time he saw clearly that he *had* been wrong to try to build his new D’ni in the ruins of the old.

“And maybe we have no option by to try,” Gat said, a defensiveness in his voice; then, softening, “Yet your idea has merit, Atrus. We should destroy their toys, at the very least. All of their hideous distractions. But the houses…we could use them, perhaps. Partition the rooms. Use them to treat the sick, or as centers of local government.”

Atrus nodded distractedly, yet he found himself appalled by the idea, if only because of those tunnels in the walls. Each Terahnee house that stood was a monument to the Great Lie in which they had all once lived; a reminder of the relyimah’s imperative *not* to be seen.

Yet not everything could be achieved at once. Some things would have to wait, and maybe this was one of them. He looked to Gat once more and saw how troubled the old man was. It was an unexpected insight.

“Everything will be for the best,” he said reassuringly. Yet even as he spoke, he recalled what Gat had said of his “blind certainty.” And, sure enough, the old man’s face changed, a smile coming to those strong yet ancient features.

“Yes, Atrus. I am sure it will be so.”

§

That afternoon it rained; the first rain Atrus had known since coming into Terahnee.

Gat had wanted to pull the canopy across, not for himself, but to protect Atrus from the downpour, but Atrus had refused and had stood there instead, enjoying the feel of the rain beating down on him. It felt refreshing after the heat of the last few days, *cleansing*.

The storm passed and he sat again, the rhythm of the oars dipping and rising from the water lulling him, his clothes, which were stuck to him, slowly drying in the sunlight.

He woke to find Gat tapping his arm. “Come, Atrus, we must walk a while.”

Atrus looked about him, then stretched and got up, climbing from the boat. Ahead of them the canal disappeared into the side of a great hill of marble. From his previous journey Atrus recognized it as the beginning of the great system of locks that ended in Ro’Jadre’s house.

None of those locks worked now, for Gat had forbidden any of his people to place themselves in harness and lift the great weights that moved the water from one level to the next. And so they made their way on foot, climbing the long flights of steps that led up the side of the hill, and out onto a great ledge of stone overlooking Ro’Jadre.

Beyond the house another boat awaited them, fresh rowers already in place. And beyond that the city.

Standing there, Atrus found himself overwhelmed suddenly by a strange ambivalence. The house, the view itself, was truly magnificent. No understanding of the evil that lay behind it could take that from it. Yet how could such beauty, such a sure instinct for what was beautiful, coexist with such inhumanity?

He followed Gat across, surprised as ever that the old man knew his way without his eyes. And as he climbed into the boat behind Gat, he found his earlier doubts washed from him.

It would work. They would make it work.

And as Ro’Jadre receded beyond the surrounding hills, Atrus found himself looking outward again, embracing the whole of that vast world in which he found himself involved, his mind beginning to formulate new plans for the relyimah, new schemes for them to carry out.

§

The capital was silent, eerily empty. As they made their way up the great channel, at its heart, the young rowers pulling slowly, staring about them as they went, Atrus came to understand just how completely Terahnee was undone.

Here nothing had survived. At the first appearance of the sickness, the relyimah had fled, leaving their masters to their fate. Weeds grew between the slabs of stone, encouraged by the recent rain.

Already it looked unkempt, abandoned, the evidence of many fires —accidental or deliberately set, it was hard to say—blackening its once-pristine whiteness.

Baddu and several of the other relyimah leaders met them at the foot of the great pile that was the royal palace, greeting them warmly in that place without warmth.

"Are they all dead?" Atrus asked, for it was like being in a giant mausoleum.

"Those that are not mad or long fled," Baddu answered him with a hint of dry humor. "We saw one earlier, wandering the streets and mumbling to himself."

"And he saw you?"

"Mad or otherwise, he was Terahnee."

Atrus nodded, yet he was pained by the thought that even after all they had suffered, the Terahnee still could not *see*. "So," he said finally, "where is Ro'Eh Ro'Dan?"

"Come," Baddu said, turning toward an arch on the far side of that marbled jetty. "It is some climb, but worth it just to see."

§

Baddu had not been joking. A thousand steps or more they climbed, and still the stairway twisted through the rock. Up and up they went, until, suddenly, they came out into a dimly lit chamber, the size of which was difficult to gauge, for it seemed like a great cavern in the rock.

For a moment Atrus thought he was back in D'ni, so reminiscent was it. But then he recognized where he was. This was the king's audience chamber, where thousands upon thousands of Terahnee notables had sat to

witness his arrival. And there, somewhere in the darkness on the far side of the great chamber, was the king's emerald throne.

"Is he here?" he asked, his voice echoing in that silent space.

In answer Baddu clapped his hands, mimicking perfectly how a Terahnee master might once have commanded his servants. At once lamps were lit on all sides of the chamber, and there, at the very center, in a boat of delicate stone, lay the great king himself, Ro'Eh Ro'Dan.

Atrus went down the steps until he stood less than ten paces from the boat. Ro'Eh Ro'Dan lay on his back on a bed of golden sheets, a narrow band of gold about his ice-pale brow. Dead he was, yet still he exuded power, so that even Baddu, who had seemed so dismissive earlier, approached the boat with awe.

"The book…" Atrus began, gesturing toward the tiny, leather-bound volume that was clasped against the dead man's chest. "What is the book?"

The relyimah looked to each other. None there dared to touch the king, dead or otherwise. Why, even to look on him was hard for many of them.

Seeing that he was going to get no answer, Atrus walked across and, grasping the stern of the boat firmly, climbed aboard. It swayed gently, rocking the corpse that lay at the center of the deck.

From this close, Atrus could smell the sickly sweet embalming fluid, could see where the embalmer's art had worked its magic on that bloodless flesh.

He turned, looking back at Baddu. "Who prepared the body?"

"Relyimah," Baddu answered. "His body servants. They came and found him here."

Carefully, he stepped across and, leaning over the corpse, prised the book from its rigid grip.

It was a history. A history of the earliest days of Terahnee. He opened the cover and read the inscription there, then felt himself go cold.

It was for him! Ro'Eh Ro'Dan had dedicated the book to him!

"What is it, Atrus?" Gat asked, coming across and standing by the stern.

"A history," he answered, his surprise becoming wonder at the thought that Ro'Eh Ro'Dan had thought of him before the end. "A history of how Terahnee came to be."

Catherine will treasure this, he thought. Yes, and Oma and Esel, too.

Atrus looked down, studying the king's pale yet handsome features. To what extent had Ro'Eh Ro'Dan been a prisoner of Terahnee and its customs? Or had he been the willing embodiment of its excesses, its utter lack of virtue? It was hard to say. Though he had been king of this evil land, Atrus could not shake from his mind his personal impression of the man.

I liked you, Ro'Eh Ro'Dan, and in other circumstances we might even have been friends.

Instead he had come and killed him, just as effectively as if he'd plunged a knife straight through his heart.

And so D'ni had erased Terahnee. Removed it like a footnote from a book. The page turned and it was gone.

Atrus turned away. It was time to bury Ro'Eh Ro'Dan. Time to say farewell to the past and get on with the future.

§

They carried Ro'Eh Ro'Dan on a bier of camphor wood and bronze, down through the levels of his mighty palace, where a hundred kings had ruled before him, and out into the great square at the heart of the capital. There, before the statue of the Nameless King, founder of Terahnee, the relyimah set him down, bowing before him in death as they had not been permitted to in life.

Just beyond the statue they had piled a big stack of wood. Having shown the king respect, they carried him across and placed the bier on top. There was a moment's silence, then Gat stepped forward and, his voice heavy with emotion, began to speak.

"The chains that bound us now are broken, and we celebrate their passing, just as we honor the passing of the last king of Terahnee." He paused, then proclaimed, "Let no man henceforth be our master."

And with that he lowered his arm, and as he did several relyimah set torches to the huge pile. There was a moment's panic and then the flames rushed up, catching with a roar, a sudden brightness. The eyes of the Unseen went to that, drawn to it, seeing how the flames danced about

the king's body like servants attending to it, how they stripped it of its finery, as if for sleep.

"Jidar N'ram!"

The cry startled Atrus. Turning, he saw that a small party of relyimah had come. Breathless, they hurried toward Gat, then slowed, seeing how the old man's attention was held by the fire.

"Jidar N'ram!" one of them said, kneeling before the old man. "We have news!"

Atrus narrowed his eyes. He did not recognize the term; yet it was clearly Gat who had been addressed.

"What is it?" Gat said, wrenching his attention away from the burning pyre.

"They are coming!" the messenger said tremblingly, his eyes anxiously skipping here and there, afraid to focus on the old man's face.

"Who?" Gat said, with untypical impatience. "*Who* is coming?"

"The P'aarlie! They have brought a great army from their homeworld to subdue us!"

There was a groan from the listening relyimah. Their eyes were round with fear. And then, as one, they seemed to hunch into themselves, as if trying to disappear from sight.

"The P'aarli…" Gat said, the words almost an exhalation. All color had fled from the old man's face. Even he seemed deflated by this news.

"You must fight them," Atrus said. "You are many…"

"Maybe so. Yet we know nothing of fighting."

"Then summon Ymur. You talked of giving him a task. Well, harness him to this. Let him raise a force to stop the P'aarli. If he is half the man I think he is…"

Gat shuddered. For a moment he seemed completely lost. Then, as if waking to himself again, he gave a tiny nod. "All right. We shall summon Ymur and make him the leader of our forces. Yet what if he fails?'

"Then he shall have bought us time." Atrus smiled, then laid his hand firmly on the old man's shoulder. "Come, Gat. Call a meeting of the elders. There are more ways than one to defeat one's enemies."

§

The man stood on the summit of the hill, looking down the lush sweep of the valley toward the massive house that overlooked it. There, to the left of the house, at the center of the valley, a host of black-clothed relyimah were on the move across the fields, the front line cutting the stalks of the massive plants and passing them back to others, who carried them quickly to the side and deposited them in massive carts. But this was no harvest. Even from a distance he could see that the crop was unripe, the swathe they were cutting merely a means of making quick passage across the land. Besides, just beyond that wall of stooping human bodies, a huge phalanx of P'aarli, their red cloaks marking them out as distinctly as their silver hair, marched slowly in ranks, a great boatlike carriage at their rear, carried by forty slaves. There was an ornate golden canopy and, at the back of the carriage, an extraordinarily large chair. But whoever it was that sat in that chair was almost totally hidden from view. Only a pair of long, pale hands showed in the daylight, clutching the arms of a huge green throne.

The man had been a slave himself, before the sickness, and now, seeing that great army of P'aarlie descend into the valley, he felt a sickening dread. They had returned. The brief dream of better times was ended. He could hear the incessant clanking of the chains even from where he stood and knew that soon his own limbs would feel once more the cold fire of the iron.

As he watched, one of the P'aarli peeled off from the main body and walked back to the carriage, matching his pace with it as he spoke to whoever was within. There was a moment's pause and then, with a bow, the fellow turned away, hurrying along the edge of the P'aarli ranks, speaking to this one here and that one there as he went.

Seeing that, the watching man grew still, a faint tremble passing through him. And then he gasped, as four groups of eight men separated from the main mass of P'aarli and, in running formation, made their way out from that great marching host.

He had seen this once before, back on his home Age, when, as a child of four, the P'aarli had come. He had witnessed the same that day: the marching host in endless ranks, and then the smaller groups—scouting parties—sent out with nets and knives and hooks to find their prey. The

nearest of the squads was already climbing the slope toward him, moving in a crouching run. With a cry one of them spotted him.

The trembling in him grew, and for a moment he could not move. Then, with an urgency he had not felt since that day twenty years before, he turned and ran, his heart hammering in his chest, his breath rasping from him, not knowing where or if he would find safety.

§

The P'aar'ro, the great steward, leader of the P'aarli, lounged in his chair, in the cool of the great canopy, lulled by the movement of the carriage beneath him. The campaign had begun well. Already a huge number of the relyimah—more than eight hundred thousand in all—had been taken and penned, and more were being taken by the hour. Those who resisted were slaughtered, but that was not many, and he was loathe to waste good slaves. The habit of obedience, deeply instilled in them, had not been shaken by events, and it was that as much as anything that reassured him. They were a rabble, after all. Disorganized. Totally without rational thought. One had only to tell them to submit and they obeyed. Even so, the task was not inconsiderable, and he had prepared his men for trouble.

He gazed about him indolently. It was some time since he had last been in Terahnee, and he had forgotten how pleasant a place it was. In recent years much of his time had been spent in the home Age, supervising the great task of training new stewards, but the sickness had changed all that. Now their priorities had changed.

He looked down, past the broad, elaborately decorated gunwales to where the slaves slowly walked, their eyes averted, the long wooden poles, cut to resemble a thickly corded rope, resting on their shoulders. Could he train himself *not* to see them?

The thought amused him. It was like the chair in which he sat; it was a perfect copy of the king's great chair, only jade, not emerald. But why should he put up with copies anymore?

Yes, things had changed, and they must change with them.

They would need stewards for a start.

Well…maybe there were some among the relyimah who could be trained to that task. The scribes, perhaps.

The P’aar’Ro grinned, then sat back, letting his eyes close lazily. It was time they took things easy. Time they got someone else to do the dirty work.

§

Ymur was waiting for them in the orchard. As the P’aarli passed between the trees, his men fell on them from above, while others, who had been hiding behind the trunks, rushed at them with nets and knives, using their own tricks on them.

Most of them were killed in that first frenzied minute, but two of the P’aarli survived, pinned down beneath his men. Ymur watched them struggle to get up, listening to their incessant shouting, then stepped up to the nearest of them and slapped his face hard.

The man fell silent. There was blood on his lip and his eyes were wide with shock.

“How many of you are there?” Ymur asked, crouching over the man, meeting his eyes and letting him see he was not afraid of him.

The P’aarli just laughed.

Ymur slapped him again, harder this time, making the man cry out.

There was laughter from the watching relyimah; a cruel, satisfied laughter.

Ymur looked about him, grinning now, then straightened up. “What does it matter?” he said, turning his back on the two. “We’ll have them all before we’re finished.” Then, drawing his long knife, a great butcher’s knife used for cutting haunches, he turned back and showed it to them, enjoying the sight as the blood drained from their faces.

§

Ymur’s men placed the bodies on straw pallets, then took them out and displayed them around all the local estates, making much of the

wounds, and laughing as they told how easy it had been. And then, when that tale was told, they would raise the standard and bid all there to come and join them in the great task of liberating Terahnee.

Many blanched at that and turned away, but many others responded, and so the small rabble with which Ymur had begun became a host, and then an army.

As he went about his camp, arranging things, Ymur nodded to himself. It was strange how it had happened, how the old men had come to him, for it had been in his own mind to raise a force and take on the accursed P'aarli. Better that—better death—than be a slave again. And so he threw himself into the task, cajoling and bullying, attempting to meld that docile host into some kind of fighting force.

He knew it would not be easy. That business in the orchard had been a cheat, in a way. He had known he could get away with it…with luck. But fighting a full-fledged battle against a well-disciplined army was another thing. He had seen the P'aarli at work in the Ages, and could not forget how fearsome they had looked. It did not scare *him*, but he knew he was exceptional in that regard. Most of his men would as willingly jump into a raging fire as face that great host. Yet there had to be a way.

Four days he had, if reports of the P'aarli's progress could be believed. Five days at most.

He stopped, then laughed, seeing that the answer had come, unasked, in the very weave of his thoughts. Fire. That was it! He would use fire.

"Uta!" he called, summoning the slave-child who had been one of the first to flock to his banner. "Come, child, I have a message for you to run. To Atrus, back at the capital. It begins…"

§

Atrus was standing at his desk, studying the map of the capital that was spread out before him, when Uta stepped into the room.

"Uta!" he cried, pleased to see the boy. "You have news for me?"

Uta came across and, stopping before Atrus, bowed his head low, not looking up as he spoke.

“Ymur bids me hail you his friend, and asks if such a thing as liquid fire can be had. If so, he asks for a thousand barrels of it, to be delivered to him by tomorrow evening latest.”

Atrus stared at the boy, astonished. “Liquid fire?” he said quietly, more to himself than in answer. “Yes…I will supply it.”

He nodded decisively. “Tell our good friend Ymur that he will have what he asks for.”

Uta made to turn and leave the room, but Atrus called him back.

“Hold on, Uta! Wait an hour before you return. Catherine, I know, would like to see you before you go.”

§

After the boy had gone, Atrus stood there a long while, wondering to what use Ymur was thinking of putting the liquid fire. Whatever it was, he would have to give him instructions—send Irras, maybe, or Carrad to advise him in its use. Then, shrugging that off, he turned his attention back to the map.

He had already marked which avenues and canals in the eastern city should be cut off, and Hersha and Eedrah were already busy organizing the task. Now he needed to decide which of the remaining thoroughfares was best suited to his plan.

If his guess was right, the P’aarli would want to take the capital. If so, then he would lead them into a maze of sorts. I deadly maze, where things were constantly dropped on them and shot at them.

There would be no battles, not even hand-to-hand, for the relyimah would remain unseen.

Gat, particularly, had liked the plan. But Baddu had been far less convinced by it. “Why should the P’aarli come into our trap? What if they wait outside?”

“Then they wait,” Atrus said. “But we make sure they have no means of supporting themselves while they wait. We take away their food and water.”

“But how do we do that?” Baddu had asked.

“By burning every field about the east of the capital and blocking up every waterway.”

“And if that fails?”

“Then we find another way to fight them. We are many.”

“We are many,” Gat echoed, liking the phrase, nodding his blind face enthusiastically. “And the P’aarli…” He grinned broadly. “The P’aarlie are arrogant. They will come into our trap!”

§

They had drawn the big awning back, to reveal the P’aar’Ro, seated in his honorary chair of state. The relyimah had moved back out of sight, and the carriage seemed to rest—to float almost—between the pillars.

The three Terahnee halted, looking about them, not certain quite how to proceed. Then, gaining in confidence, they walked through into the great hall, smiling as they saw the silver hair of the old man, the wine-red cloak. This much, at least, was familiar.

“P’aar’Ro!” one of them called, hailing the Great Steward. “We welcome you to Ro’Derraj! We are the last Terahnee in the district. The governor…”

He fell silent, then waited, expecting the P’aar’Ro to stand, perhaps, and come down to greet them, but the chief of the servants merely sat there, as if no one had spoken. Indeed, now that they looked closer, the Terahnee noticed that he was eating!

They turned, looking back at the line of P’aarlie who now stood along the line of the great doorway, blocking it, then turned back.

Strange…

“When we heard you had returned, we were overjoyed!” the second of them said, then stopped, for the P’aar’Ro had sat forward, as if about to speak. Instead, gesturing to the stewards behind them, he nodded toward the three Terahnee then drew his finger across his throat.

“P’aar’Ro?” one of them queried. “Is the interview over?”

But he had barely finished the sentence when he was grabbed from behind.

The P’aar’Ro considered the half-eaten fruit in his hand, then threw it aside, feigning not to notice the slave who quickly and unobtrusively retrieved it and carried it away.

Practice, he told himself. All it needs is practice.

§

Ymur went down the line of carts, inspecting each one's stock of barrels carefully, then turned, looking to Carrad.

"Excellent!" he said. "But let us hope we shall not have to use them!"

Carrad scratched his bald pate. "You mean to hold them in reserve, Ymur? But surely…"

Ymur took the young man's arm and led him across to his tent. Inside, he turned and faced the big fellow.

"I will say this once and not repeat it. Nor will you mention this to anyone, Master Carrad. The fire is not for the P'aarli, it is to be used on our own men, in case they do not have the stomach to fight."

"But…"

"No buts. We can defeat the P'aarli. Overrun them by sheer weight of numbers. But not if we are running the wrong way! I mean but to stiffen their resolve."

Carrad nodded, but he was ill at ease suddenly. To be truthful, he had not liked the sound of this little man when Atrus had briefed him about what to expect, and in person he found him even less attractive. Yet Uta, whom he took to be a good judge of character, seemed to idolize the man.

"Tell me who I am to instruct," Carrad said.

"Good," Ymur said. "You will speak to the mutes later…"

"Mutes?"

Ymur smiled. "You think I could trust such a thing to men with tongues? Even relyimah talk among themselves!"

He met Ymur's eyes briefly, seeing the cruelty there, alongside the anger he had expected to find, then lowered his head. "As you wish, Ymur."

§

There were so many now that it was becoming a problem to feed and water them, to clothe them properly and find them weapons. But it would not be a problem for long. The P'aarli army was, if his scouts were right, but an hour away, camped in a great hollow on the edge of the local governor's estate.

It was an hour from sunset, and if he took his men directly there they could engage with the P'aarli before dark. Not that it mattered. Ymur was prepared to fight them beneath the moon, if necessary. Indeed, he had considered long and hard whether there would be any advantage to doing so. But sunset seemed right somehow. Men were relaxed at that time of day. Or would be, in a camp. Whereas his own men would be tense from a long forced march.

Half a million men followed his banner now. It was more than a hundred times the number of the P'aarli. But that was no guarantee of success. If the first line faltered and turned, then he could find himself at the head of a retreating herd. They would trample themselves to death.

He stretched his arms as he walked, then looked about him at his chiefs, who walked along beside him—men he had picked from the ranks for their attitude. Men like himself, mainly. And, at the back of the small group, young Uta, who had proved a surprise. He had thought at first that Uta was a plant, an ear in his camp for Atrus and the rest of them, but the child could not hide his enthusiasm. He was as keen as Ymur to rid Terahnee of the Masters and their helpers.

Ymur grinned at the thought, then turned his attention to the runner who had come up over the hill and was heading directly toward him.

"What is it?" he asked, neither stopping nor slowing his pace, letting the man fall in beside him. "Are the P'aarli on the move?"

"No, Ymur," the man answered breathlessly. "Unless you count moving toward their beds as strategy!"

There was laughter among the leading group.

"Then let us hope to find a few of them asleep," Ymur said, and, hastening his pace, drew the long knife from his belt and raised it, as if the P'aarli were already in sight.

§

The P’aarli were seated about their fires, talking and laughing, discussing the day’s “sport.” The sun was low now, the shadows long, and the moon was already climbing the sky to the west.

This was a pleasant land—more pleasant than most they ventured into—and the relyimah here were docile and conditioned. Even so, they had set a guard, as they did in more hostile Ages, though more from habit than expectation of attack.

It was thus that they failed to note the sudden darkening of the sky about the upper ridges of the valley. And if any there heard anything they no doubt thought it the sound of distant thunder.

Ymur, looking down on the encampment from the ridge took in the neat disposition of the tents, the orderliness of the fires, the way the food wagons were placed, and other details, knowing he could learn from them. Then, having looked enough, he raised his arm and, with a whooping cry, threw himself down the slope, yelling at the top of his voice as he ran, his weapon held high, hearing the great thunderous cries of his ragtag army as they threw themselves after him.

He had considered silence and surprise—had thought of stealing into the camp at night and slitting throats—but this was better. He would lose more men, but what of it? No one praised a skulking man, but a bold one, that was different.

As they smashed into the first line of P’aarli, Ymur felt a great wave of elation rise up in him and sweep him away, and for a time he was mindless, his knife arm rising and falling, cleaving friend and foe without distinction.

And then, even as their defeat seemed certain, the P’aarli rallied. A small group of them formed up at the center of the camp and began to fight their way out toward the great house at the far end of the valley. The relyimah, facing this determined group, buckled and fled, throwing their weapons down in fear, by Ymur, coming to himself again, saw this and, taking several of his handpicked men, went and intercepted them, taking risks with his own life—showing his men by example what could be done—and in a moment the P’aarli were overrun as more and more relyimah rejoined the fight.

And then, suddenly, it was over, and a strange silence fell over the camp.

Ymur walked out into the center of the camp, seeing, by the light of the campfires, the great piles of dead that had fought here. “Burn it!” he said, looking about him. “Burn it all! Then on to He’Darra. Let us finish with these P’aarli!”

§

“Where are you going in such a hurry?”

The P’aar’Ro stopped, then slowly turned. The relyimah he was facing came barely to his chest, and in the flickering lamplight he seemed to have a strange, squinting face.

“Is no one *carrying* you, Great Steward?”

“I…” The P’aar’Ro swallowed. The truth was, his slaves had deserted the moment the relimah had attacked the encampment. He, fortunately, had been in the house at the time and so had had the chance to escape. Or so he’d thought.

“Would you like *us* to carry you, P’aar’Ro?”

The man looked about him. The shadows might be playing tricks, but he had the strong sense that there were no friendly faces here. Were these men part of the slave army, or just stragglers? If so, he might yet intimidate them.

“You have a litter?” he asked, trying to sound more confident than he felt.

“We do,” their spokesman answered, and at his gesture four of the relyimah brought up a simple straw pallet, then squatted there, as if about to let him mount.

“That?” the P’aar’Ro asked, incredulous now.

“It’s what we use,” the little man said.

“Use?”

“To carry the bodies…”

The P’aar”Ro’s mouth went dry. “I…”

“Hold him,” Ymur said, smiling, almost gentle as he stepped toward the Great Steward. “Hold him tightly while I gouge out his eyes.”

§

Atrus heard the cheering long before the messenger arrived. Going out onto the balcony, he was in time to see Hersha hurry across the courtyard to intercept the man.

There was a moment's brief consultation, and then the old man straightened, letting out a great whoop of joy.

So Ymur had done it. He had crushed the P'aarli army. Atrus took a long breath, glad in a way that he had not been needed.

"Atrus!" Hersha called, coming across. "The P'aarli have been destroyed, the P'aar'Ro taken! And now Ymur goes on to He'Darra to finish the job!'

"He'Darra?"

"It is the place where they bring through the slaves. It is an awful, terrible place. Ymur means to destroy it and close the link with the P'aarli home world."

Atrus nodded, but he was wondering if Ymur understood what was required to close the link. "We should stop the construction work," he said, setting his mind to practical matters.

"I shall see to it," Hersha answered. "But at the same time I shall give permission to break into the Terahnee wine cellars. We have been sober far too long, Atrus! It is time to celebrate. And when Ymur returns we shall throw a great feast in his honor!"

"And Gat…does Gat know yet?"

"I know," Gat said, coming silently behind them. "Can you not hear it, Atrus?...listen. That noise…it is the sound of freedom."

§

The entrance to He'Darra was a long, dark slit in the earth. Broad, black steps descended into that darkness, and as you walked down them the ground seemed to swallow you up. Down and down those steps went, as if to the very center of the world.

The place stank. Its foul and fetid odor wafted up from the darkness like an unseen cloud.

Ymur wrinkled his nose. He had been six when he'd left here. Less than eight weeks, that was all the time he had spent at He'Darra, and yet those fifty days had left so deep and dark a scar on him that even now he shivered at the thought of what lay below where he stood.

He bared his teeth; then, signaling for his men to follow, began the descent.

Here, nearest the surface, spreading out to either side of the main stairway, were the quarters where the guards—P'aarli, of course—slept and ate, with spacious kitchens and good beds and huge lamps hanging from the ceilings of the rooms. Here, too, were the storerooms and weapons rooms. Ymur stopped at one, going down the line of whips that hung from one wall and selecting a particularly fierce-looking one. But there were other things here, too: scourges and chains, cleavers and surgical knives. Things that the Masters—the Terahnee scum—knew nothing of. For this was the domain of the P'aarli. Here the stewards were the lords and masters, given power by the Terahnee to turn compliant captives into true slaves. Here the long months of subjugation in the Training Age were given their final polish, their final shape.

Stepping out onto the great stairway again, he gestured to his men. "Bring lamps!"

They hurried, returning a moment later in a blaze of light, falling in to either side of Ymur as he began the descent again.

Ahead lay the great gate. Beyond it were the pens.

It was a huge circle of stone, wedged into the surrounding earth. At the center of it, twenty feet apart, were two enormous doors made of thick stone bars, like the doors of a massive cell.

And so it was. For down here they had kept more than a million relyimah at a time. Boys, none of them older than seven or eight, and most far younger.

Ymur looked to his left. "You remember this place, Uta?"

Uta hesitated, then nodded, his eyes filled with fear.

"Some shut it out," Ymur said. "It is the only way they can deal with it. But I remember *everything*."

"Yes," Uta said, his voice small, afraid. "I remember, too."

"Good," Ymur said, then walked on.

The gates were unlocked. Ymur waited as his men pushed the massive things back on their hinges, then went through.

Here the stink became a stench. Farther up, in the P’aarli quarters, there had been ventilation shafts and fans, but here, though there was some ventilation, it was of the most basic kind, and the smell of the millions who had passed through here lingered on.

That stench, more than anything, reminded him. He had seen such cruelty here, such studied brutality, that in retrospect he had found the Training Age almost humane by comparison. Here not a single mistake was tolerated. Floggings and beatings had been the norm. And worse. Even those who complied were sometimes taken. For sport, or simple malice. And the worst of it had been his own impotence to act. What he felt now, he had felt then. That same burning anger, that same hideous sense of injustice.

Well, now he could do something about that. Now he could take an army through, to destroy the P’aarli world and erase all memory of their existence.

He went down, the torches burning in the darkness, revealing, to either side, the great cages—pens, they had called them, as if he relyimah were simple beasts—that had held ten thousand boys at a time. Endless rows of ankle chains littered the floors, deep drainage sluices crisscrossing the cold stone. Here, if a boy died, he was left until he rotted, as a “lesson”—one of many that the P’aarli taught them.

Next, running back into the earth for miles in all directions, were the tunnels where they had learned the art of moving silently; tunnels in which, should a boy forget which exit he should take, he could be lost forever.

Farther down were the chambers where they kept the training weights, the massive iron blocks still on their pulleys, a hundred ropes dangling limply down, the leather harnesses lying empty on the floor.

Once more he bared his teeth at the memory, then turned away. Down he went. Down past more pens, more chambers where they’d learned their hideous tasks. Down finally to the lowest level where, beyond one final gate, the Book Rooms lay.

§

Ymur was sitting in the night, silent, thoughtful, the P'aar'Ro's throne beneath him, his army camped in the valley below, their campfires speckling the blackness.

It was there that the messenger found him. Kneeling, the man held out the scroll that had been sent. Ymur took it, then handed it to the scribe who stood there, ever-present, at his side.

The scribe unrolled the paper and quickly read it through, then, raising his voice, he read aloud.

"Good brother, we salute you! Your victory is a victory for all the relyimah! To celebrate this most happy occasion, there shall be a great feast in the capital when you return. The elders thank you and hold you in great honor!"

Ymur waited, then looked to the man. "Is that all?"

The scribe kept his eyes averted. "That is all…Master."

Ymur grabbed the paper from him and tore it up. So that was it, eh? A feast! And then what? Was he their servant, to do *this* for them and *that?* No, it wasn't enough. Not half enough. When he went back the old men would still be in control. And what would he do? Sit on his hands and watch them make a mess of things? No. No, that would not be!

He stood, angry now. Forget the P'aarli. He would deal with this first.

"We *thank* you…and *honor* you…" he said, a mocking sneer in his voice. Then, turning, he clapped his hands. "Scribe!" he barked. "Bring pen and paper! I have an answer for the old men!"

§

Falling to his knees, the messenger hung his head before old Gat, as if he was ashamed.

"Well, man?" Gat asked. "What is it?"

Not looking up, the man held out the paper that the scribe had written. Eedrah took it and, unfolding it, began to read it aloud for Gat's benefit. Halfway through he slowed.

"…and so, for the safety and security of all, I, Ymur, will take on the great burden of governing Terahnee…"

"He means to make us all his slaves," Gat said.

“Then we must fight him,” Hersha said at once.

“No,” Atrus said. “I shall meet him. I shall talk with him and persuade him from this course.”

Atrus saw how the messenger flinched at that.

“You think he will not meet?”

The messenger’s head dropped lower. His voice was barely a whisper. “He might meet with you, brother, but not to talk.”

“Then why should he agree to meet?”

“Why, to kill you, brother. He has already sentenced you to death. You and all the other D’ni.”

“I see.”

There was a brief silence, then Gat spoke again. “It seems we have but two choices now, Atrus. To fight or to submit. Which is it to be?”

Atrus looked to him, a sadness in his eyes. He had hoped it would never come to this. “I have no experience of battle. Nor do I feel that violence will solve this. If we begin that way, then a pattern has been set.”

Yet even as he said it, Atrus understood that what Gat had said was true. It was not like fighting the P’aarli. Nor were there any compromise solutions to this. Ymur’s actions had changed things totally.

“If you wished to leave, we would understand,” Gat said. “This is not, after all, your fight.”

“Do you think I would leave you now, brother?”

“Then we must arm ourselves as best we can.” Gat turned to Hersha and Baddu, his blind eyes seeming to see first one and then the other of them. “So, brothers, who is it to be?”

§

The spiral tower twisted into the sky, the shattered edges of its pearled interior fire-blackened, its delicate glass windows, once a Terahnee child’s delight, now dark like blinded eyes.

Within its jagged shadow, at the center of a deep, luxurious lawn, Ymur’s great tent had been pitched, its blood-red canvas like a stain. About it the burned-out ruins of the once-great house still smoldered, sending a smudge of black into the cloudless summer sky.

Beneath the mound on which it stood a valley sloped away. Once wooded, it had been cleared and the tents of a great army, half a million strong, now filled it, a vast tide of multicolored canvas stretching out of sight, surrounding the ancient watercourse that wound its way between the folding hills.

It was a warm, windless evening and the ragged golden banners above the great tent hung limp now. Slaves moved back and forth across the green, going about their tasks, while in a palanquin before the tent sat Ymur himself, his chiefs and servants in attendance.

Right now he was silent, brooding, staring past the valley at the distant city. It was no more than five days' march away, a massive marker that drew the eye constantly to it.

Ymur belched noisily, then looked down at the pair of lenses in his hands. He had not dared to look through them himself, yet it was said that with these the D'ni could see far into the distance, yes, and even penetrate the darkness with them. They were magical, and he had stolen that magic.

He had watched Atrus at the gathering; seen that disdainful look on the liar's face, and though the others might be fooled, *he* was not. The D'ni were masters, like the Terahnee, and given the chance they would install their mastery once more. They spoke the same language and shared the same blood. How could they not be masters?

Not that everything about the masters had been wrong. The relyimah had to be ruled, after all, but all this nonsense about absolute codes and laws could not do it. It needed a strong man to make strong laws.

Ymur looked about him. Good. All of their eyes were averted. So he had ordered. They were not to look at him, not even to cast their glance over him as their eyes traveled elsewhere. Relyimah he was, and so he would remain, even when all others could be seen.

On the far side of the mound, a path led down into the valley. Along that path a great line of wagons made their way, a dozen slaves harnessed to each wagon, straining to pull the heavy loads of food that would feed Ymur's army, a chosen man seated at the bench of each, whipping on their fellow slaves.

Old habits could prove useful, Ymur knew, and he would not discourage them. Some men were born to be slaves—they had a menial

cast of mind—but others could be raised and used. So he would order *his* society, so build *his* kingdom from the ruins of the old.

His eyes strayed to the path again, noticing something. A running man, heading up the path, against the stream of wagons. Ymur stood, drawing the big cleaver he had chosen as his preferred weapon.

As the man approached, he relaxed. It was one of his own messengers. Even so, he kept the cleaver at his side. Just in case.

Ten paces from Ymur, the man dropped to his knees and bent double.

"Speak," Ymur said.

"We have had word," the man said. "A rival army has been formed. Old Baddu is leading it."

Ymur laughed. "And how big is this…army?"

"Fifty thousand men. Some say eighty."

Ymur grinned and looked about him. Others were smiling now, though none dared to look, each one of them flinching from his gaze. Even if the higher figure were true, his own army was at least six times that size. And better armed, no doubt.

"How far are they from here?"

"Two days' march."

Ymur grinned. "Good." He raised his hands and clapped them together. At once two slaves came scuttling and fell to the earth beneath his feet.

"Bring me food!" he ordered, clipping one of them hard about the ear, just as he had so often been struck, back in those days when *he* had been a slave. "And wine! The best in the cellars!"

Ymur looked about him arrogantly. "Come, brothers, let us celebrate our victory!"

§

Ymur had burned all of the land for miles around, then had waited at the center of that great circle of darkness, the best part of three hundred thousand men at his back, as Baddu's "army" timidly crossed that black, featureless terrain.

Poor Baddu, Ymur thought, resting his foot on the old man's corpse. He hadn't stood a chance. Not that he'd had more than a hundred of his men with him by the time he'd reached Ymur. The rest had run. Not far, for Ymur's own men were waiting for them, with whips and chains. Now they crouched nearby, chained to each other hand and foot, waiting to see what Ymur would do with them.

"Uta…" Ymur said, calling the boy to him, "I have a task for you. I want you to go to the elders and tell them this. If they want to avoid my wrath in battle they must send the D'ni, Atrus, to meet me. If not, I shall kill them all."

Uta, who had averted his eyes, nodded.

"Then hurry, boy. I am impatient for their answer."

§

The wind was blowing gently as Uta walked up between the trees at the foot of the valley, and passed the guard post. On he went, up that much-trampled path and out onto the hump, from where he could see the great house, nestled into the hills at the far end of the valley.

The house was ruined now, and as he looked he saw the blood-red smudge that was Ymur's tent. Between was a large swathe of makeshift canopies, of silk and sack and canvas, and of as many colors as the eye could imagine.

Two days he'd been away. Only two days, and yet it all had changed. Atrus had begged him to stay, had said he'd send another messenger to give the man his answer, but Uta had refused. He had chosen. He was Ymur's messenger now, and he must live with that.

Uta scratched at the stubble on his head, then scrambled down the well-worn path. A dozen paces and he was among their tents, conscious suddenly of what a ragtag assortment of ill-fed and undisciplined souls they were. Some lay within their tents, drunk or asleep, others sat outside and nervously picked at their unwashed limbs. Most were silent, however, and subdued, their natural docility unchanged. Dark-eyed like cattle they were, though some were palpably afraid.

Walking among them, he seemed to see their faces for the first time, his gaze, like his presence, unchallenged. Makeshift weapons hung from the poles of their lean-tos, kitchen and farming implements mainly, but occasionally some clever adaptation of a Terahnee toy.

But what struck him most was the silence of an encampment so large. What once had seemed as natural as breath now seemed the most unnatural thing of all. His time among the D'ni—with their incessant talk, their curiosity, their *laughter*—had changed him. Catherine particularly had encouraged him to talk, and Marrim, too, so that now he found this silence not just sorrowful but obscene—the most palpable sign of mastery. And they were done with mastery.

Or so he'd thought.

Uta raised his eyes, looking between the tents, and saw again the house and the palatial tent that stood before it, its golden banners idle in the still, warm air. And walked on, knowing that he had at last begun to see.

§

In the first light of dawn, Atrus stood to one side of the big arch, watching the relyimah come through, marching in ranks as he had taught them, some of them risking a glance at him as they passed. They were in good spirits, considering, for in an hour or two at most many of them would almost certainly be dead. But that was nothing new, and at least this once those deaths would have a meaning—to maintain the freedom fate had given them.

Eedrah, standing beside him, nudged Atrus. "Look at them," he whispered. "They glow simply to see you, Atrus."

It was true. They were like candles, happy to have this one brief moment of life, this single burst of intensity. But for Atrus, there was a sadness mixed in with the pride he felt. This should not have been necessary, and he cursed Ymur for being no better than he was, and for dragging them all down to his savage level.

"How far is it?" he asked, looking past Eedrah to where Gat stood next to Hersha.

“Not far,” Hersha answered him. “Our scouts inform us that their main encampment is less than an hour’s march from here.”

“And they are there?”

Hersha nodded. “Half a million strong.”

Which meant the odds were heavily against them. But Atrus was not dismayed by that. He had organized his lesser force as well as he could given the brief time they had to prepare for this, emphasizing to them that it was strategy more than sheer numbers that would win this fight.

Or so he hoped, for neither D’ni nor Terahnee had much experience in warfare. Not in their homeworlds, nor in any of the Ages they had written. All this was new, and he could only pray that intelligence and discipline would triumph over size and brute force.

This day would tell.

As the others walked on, he joined them, silent now, brooding on the battle to come, and wondering, at the last, whether he would ever see Catherine again.

At least in that respect the relimah were fortunate, for it was easy when there was no one to regret your passing. Easier to bear your own death when there were no ties to life.

They went on, expecting at any moment to find their enemy ahead of them, to come to the crest of a hill and find Ymur’s mighty army there below them, armed and waiting. And as the minutes passed, a heavy silence fell over their ranks.

The day grew. Slowly the sun rose, the shadows shortened, and suddenly there ahead of them was the enemy.

Atrus called a halt, then stood there, just ahead of them, one hand up shielding his brow as he peered through his lenses at the distant camp.

“Well?” Eedrah asked, but Atrus put up a hand, begging for his silence. Another long moment passed, then Atrus gestured that they should move on.

Eedrah hurried to catch up with him. “Well?” he asked again. “Have they seen us yet?”

Atrus walked on in silence, striding now, so that Eedrah had almost to run to catch up with him.

“What is it?”

“They’ve gone.”

“Gone?” Eedrah put his hand on Atrus’s arm and pulled him round. “What do you mean, gone? How can an army of half a million go?”

Atrus stopped. Behind him the great host of relyimah came to a sudden halt.

“I do not know. But he camp *has* been abandoned. Their tents are all still there, and there are hundreds of huge wagons piled with food, but there is no sign of Ymur’s army.”

Eedrah turned, looking about him anxiously. “Then maybe it’s a trap.”

“I do not think so.”

“But how can you be sure?”

“Because it is Ymur, and Ymur would not hesitate to try to crush us on the battlefield. He would think it shameful to set traps.”

“Then what has happened?”

Stepping up to join them, Gat answered Eedrah. “I’d say our friend is dead. No other obstacle would keep him from the battlefield.”

“I’d say that’s so,” Atrus agreed, “yet I dare not hope it true.”

“Nor I,” Gat said. “But let us go and see.”

§

They found Ymur on the lawn before his tent, on his back, his blank eyes staring sightlessly at the unblemished sky, the knife that had taken his breath still lodged within his ribs. Close by, his own wounds all too evident, lay Uta, also dead.

Seeing the child, Atrus felt a pain so sharp it took away his breath. He groaned and wrapped his arms about himself, and Gat, not knowing what it was, called upon Hersha to tell him.

“It is the slave-child,” Hersha answered, his own face creased with pain. “The boy he saved. The one who spoke out for him at the gathering.”

The old man groaned, then straightened up. “Then let us honor him this day, for by his death he has saved a great many more.”

Eedrah stood there, watching Atrus awhile, seeing how he went across and, lifting the boy, cradled him, as if he were his own.

Atrus turned to face them, tears on his cheeks. “Send messengers out to spread the news, and to tell the relyimah elders to come to a

gathering in the capital.” He looked down at the child again, then shook his head. “This is the end. There must be no more of this.”

PART EIGHT

HE WHO NUMBERS BUT DOES NOT NAME.

IT IS HE WHO HERALDS THE COMING TRAGEDY.

HIS FOOTPRINTS LAY ABOUT THE MUDDIED POOL.

--FROM THE EJEMAH’TERAK,

BOOK FOUR, VV. 3111-14

At the center of the raftered ceiling, hanging down between the six supporting poles, was a massive inverted funnel, cunningly fashioned of wood. Beneath it a circle of earth had been excavated and filled with close-fitting stones, that pit surrounded by a built-up bank of rock, in which a huge pile of firewood had been carefully stacked.

Outside, the great plains of this new Age ran dark to the horizon, the distant mountains touched by the pale light of a tiny moon. It was late now, and the lodge house, finished hours past, was deep in shadow, its wooden walls and pillars, its sleeping stalls and meeting rooms lit only by a handful of flickering lamps, set high up on the inner walls, ancient oil lamps in iron cressets. Several hundred were gathered there in the space surrounding the pit as Eedrah struck the tinder and, raising the long pole, carried the flaming lamp across.

There was a pause as the kindling caught and then a sudden blaze of light. Sparks flew up into the darkness overhead.

There was a great cheer. In the burgeoning light, dozens of smiling faces looked to Eedrah.

“Say something!” Marrim called. She was swollen of belly now; the firelight danced in her smiling face.

Eedrah looked about him; then, casting the pole into the blazing fire, he raised both arms for silence. “Friends,” he began, “this has been a memorable day, a day of new beginnings, and I am glad to be among such company. But lest we forget, I would like to thank one person who, above all others, is responsible for our happiness…”

He turned, looking to where Atrus sat beside Catherine, and extending an arm, beckoned Atrus to join him.

Reluctantly, Atrus stood and came across. There was another huge cheer that went on and on until Eedrah raised a hand for silence.

“M words are brief and simple,” Eedrah said, and, turning to Atrus, he bowed deeply. “On behalf of all here, we thank you, Atrus.”

There were more cheers and whoops from Irras and Carrad.

Atrus looked about him, his expression for that moment stern, determined—the face they knew so well—and then he smiled. “Friends”—he turned, looking to Gat—“brothers…I am fortunate to be here with you tonight. Fortunate to have known you all. But now you must set out on this new venture without me.”

There were cries of “No!” and “Stay!” but Atrus waved them aside.

“This is *your* world, *your* experiment in living, not mine. Yet I would offer you some words of advice before we part.”

Total silence had fallen among the watching gathering. Only the crackle of the flames broke that silence as Atrus looked about him.

“When I wrote this Age, I tried to put all my experience, everything I knew about writing, into it. To make it the best I could. Yet even as I labored to do so, I was conscious that for all my skill, I could but do half the job.”

“But this is a wonder Age!” Eedrah said.

Atrus smiled. “I thank you, Eedrah, for your kind words, yet that is not what I meant. I was speaking of the new society you must build. You see, just as we take care to write our Ages, so should we take care to creae—to write, if you like—the social forms and structures that we wish to adopt within those Ages; those elements that create a fair and healthy society. This I see as the one great task confronting you.

“This must be *your* world, and *you* must shape it. All I shall say is that you should learn from past mistakes and take what is best, not worst, from those systems you have knowledge of. You have a new start, a fresh

chance of living, with new earth to till and new air to breathe. Take that chance, but for the Maker's sake, use it wisely."

There was a deep murmur of agreement. Atrus waited until it had died down, then spoke again.

"Tomorrow we leave the past behind. Tomorrow we close a great chapter and begin anew. Yet we must not forget from whence we have come. That was the mistake the Terahnee made." He smiled. "We are not great lords, as the Terahnee thought they were, but simple men, and we must do as simple men do and build for tomorrow, brick upon brick, stone upon stone. Yet even as we do so, it is beholden upon us to remind our children and our children's children of what was, and tell them tales of lands that are no more. That is our way, and must remain our way, until the last word is written in the last book."

Atrus took a long breath, as if about to say more, then, raising a hand, he turned and walked from the circle.

There was a moment's silence, and then a great cheer went up that went on and on while the flames leapt high into the darkness.

§

That morning they returned to Terahnee for the last time.

While Atrus and the others packed, Catherine went to her room in Ro'Jethhe's mansion. Atrus found her there an hour later, stowing the last few things into her trunk.

"Are we ready?" she asked.

"Almost." Atrus kissed her shoulder, then looked across the room. There were books open on her desk—Terahnee books by the look of them—as well as her own notebook.

"Still working?"

Catherine barely glanced at him. "Hh-hmm."

"What are you working on?"

"Oh, nothing."

"Can I see?"

She laughed. "No. Not until I've finished."

"A secret, eh?"

"A secret. Now let me finish here and then I'll join you."

“Okay, but don’t be late, Catherine, or we shall go without you.”

§

Once Atrus was gone, Catherine crossed the room and, slipping the leather bookmarks back into place, picked the books up and carried them across, placing them carefully inside the trunk.

It was finally beginning to make sense. For a long time she had had nothing but snippets and vague references, tantalizing but obscure, but now, thanks to these ancient Terahnee texts, she was beginning to piece the whole of it together.

The relyimah text was a corrupted one, she knew now, and more than two-thirds of its “prophecies” were little more than doggerel added long after the originals had been framed. Not that there was one single original text of the ancient prophecies. As far as she could make out, there had been numerous so-called prophets in ancient times, back in that original homeland—Garternay—from which both Terahnee and D’ni had split off; and what was known as the Book of Prophecies was in fact a much later text, collecting together many—though not all—of the surviving prophecies.

That had been five, maybe six thousand years ago. And then had come the split and a period of forgetting so traumatic and so violent that it was a wonder anything survived to tell that tale.

Atrus, she knew, would have been angry with her had he known what she was doing. He did not believe in fate and counted the prophecies a lot of superstitious nonsense. As she, at first, had done. But circumstance had changed her mind.

A year ago, at the same time Atrus had begun work on his new Age, she had begun a deeper, more serious investigation into the matter, gathering together everything she could find on the subject, sifting through that great pile of books until she had established what was genuine and what were later additions to the canon.

But now time had caught up with her. It was time to leave Terahnee, even as she had begun to make sense of what had happened here.

Et even that, she knew now, was as it was meant to be, for time was a circle, and the circle was about to be closed.

She closed the lid of the trunk and tightened the leather straps, then went out into the hallway and called for Irras and Carrad to help her carry it.

Time. It was indeed time.

§

The sun was beginning to set as they gathered in the ruins on the top of the great plateau. Most had gone through already to the new Age, but a handful still remained, along with Hersha and the old man, Gat, who, with a party of relyimah, were to help in these final moments. A new vault had been built over the old book chamber. Two holes had been cut into its top surface: one a narrow octagonal well, the other a kind of entrance, shaped like a huge arrowhead. Beside the vault two huge pulleys rested, from each of which dangled massive chains of nara, the final links of which were pinned into the marble-smooth surface of a massive wedge of stone.

Two teams of fifty relyimah waited in harness, watching as Atrus went over to greet Hersha and Gat.

"The time is here," Atrus said solemnly.

"So it is," Gat said, his long face pushing the air. "We thought you should know, Atrus. We have renamed this Age. Today it is Terahnee still. But tomorrow, when we wake, it shall be known as Devokan."

"Hope…" Atrus said, translating the ancient D'ni word. "That is a good name for a world."

Gat nodded. "We work to build a better, simpler world."

"And no more like Ymur!"

"No, thank the Ancient words!" Old Gat grinned blindly at Atrus for a moment, then his face grew more somber. "It is a sobering lesson, Atrus, to know that gaining one's freedom is but the first step to achieving it. Nor did I guess how hard we would have to work simply to keep what we had gained. In that Ymur helped us, though he did not know it or intend it. He sent a warning to us. We have formed a great council, you know."

"I heard," Atrus said. "Oma told me."

"Oma has been a great help. And Esel, too. We shall miss them greatly."

“We shall be here in spirit, Jidar N’ram.”

“That is a comfort, Atrus, but we must learn to govern ourselves now—to be our own masters.”

“Then let us do what must be done.” He took Gat’s hands. “I am sad, old friend, and yet in my heart I know this is for the best. The child must go his own way, no?”

“So it is, Atrus. So it is.”

§

In the last light of the last day of Terahnee, nine dark figures stood atop the vault, cloaked and bare-headed at the end. Stepping out from among them, Eedrah placed the ancient Book into the carved niche within the receptacle they had fashioned, reverence in his every gesture. He stepped back and, at a signal from Atrus, Irras and Carrad began to let out the chains, lowering the Book into the deep shaft. As it touched bottom, they let go, watching, fascinated, as the fine links slithered into that eight-sided darkness.

There was a moment’s stillness, and then the great slabs, which had stood like huge stone petals about the shaft, folded down, the last of the nine—a small octagon in itself—tilting over and slotting into place like a capstone, the joint between it and the others so fine, so perfectly made, it could no longer be seen.

Atrus knelt, examining their work; then, satisfied, he stood and turned back to the company.

“Sealing these Books in stone is not as secure as the entrusting of Books between friends. Yet today we do more than safeguard the Ages. We return symbolically to that very first day, ten thousand years ago, when the great Linking Books between D’ni and Terahnee were first sealed. So it was, and so it must be once again. And so we leave this land of hope, to find our own separate destinies.”

Atrus turned, looking behind him at the dying sun.

A bird called, high and sweet in the silence.

They stood there, watching him—Catherine; and Eedrah and his young wife, Marrim; Carrad and Irras; Masters Tamon and Tergahn; and

lastly young Allem, from Averone, who had left her parents in her native world to be Marrim's pupil.

D'ni was once again sealed from Terahnee, the two Ages as inaccessible to each other as lands behind a mirror. A dream under stone.

For a moment longer they stood there, the silence engulfing them, each of them awed by the significance of that moment. The ancient ruins lay all about and below them even as the great world of Terahnee sank slowly into darkness. Then, as the twilight shaded into night, Atrus turned and descended into the vault, the others following in silence, Eedrah alone pausing briefly to turn and look back before he, too, went down into the lamp-lit interior.

The moon now shone.

At a signal from Hersha, the relyimah began to strain, hauling upon the great chains, five thousand years of practice perfected in the ease with which they raised the capping stone, that massive arrowhead swaying gently as it lifted.

Slowly it rose, swinging up and over the vault, Hersha directing his volunteers with quiet, patient words. And then slowly, very slowly, it came down again, hovering an instant, and then sliding into the waiting gap with a sigh of polished stone against polished stone.

It was done.

Silent as shadows they stole away, leaving the two ancients alone upon the plateau. They were still a moment, both blind and seeing eyes staring at the great vault that sat amid the ruins, and then they, too, turned away.

Shadows on the silver. And silence. The circle closed.

EPILOGUE

FLOWERS IN THE DESERT. THE CHILD'S EYES

OPENED WIDE.

A THOUSAND MILLION STARS DANCE

IN THE DARK MIRROR OF THE POOL.

--FROM AN UNTITLED TERAHNEE SCROLL OF

ANCIENT ORIGIN.

"…and so it ended, as it began.

"Standing there, amongst that small and humble company, I felt a sense of closure, as if the universe itself had taken pause before the final page was turned, the last word written.

"So it felt, as night fell, there on the plateau where our great journey had begun. Where, several thousand years before, that first great sealing-off of Ages had taken place.

"Time stood still, and as it did, the knowledge of what had happened flowed into me, filling me with the blessed light of understanding.

"The Prophecies…

"For five thousand years and more they had waited for him, hidden and sealed away, like some great magician's finest trick, created not to please an audience but for his delight alone.

"Yet to talk of 'magic' is to somehow belittle the achievement of whoever first drafted those prophecies, for it is now clear to me that their complex phraseology stems from the same root—maybe even from the same bold experiments—that produced the Great Art itself, and just as those words connected Age to Age, so these quite different words connected Time to Time.

"It was seen. I have no doubt about that now. Yet the fact that it was seen changes nothing. Had Atrus known—had he been aware of the awesome significance of what he did—then his actions might have taken on an air of futility, his whole life become a puppet-dance, but as it is I find his actions quite remarkable. Time and again he risked himself. Time and again he set himself against the tide of events. And to what purpose? To fulfill a prophecy? No. For at no point did he ever know the outcome of his actions. His whole life has been forged in a great furnace of not knowing, and ultimately, it is that not knowing, that determination in him to do what he thought was right and not what was expedient, that has made

his actions more than something fated: more—much, much more—than something merely ‘Seen.’ Written as he was, Atrus nonetheless wrote his own path, like a Looking Book back to himself.

“And it is of Atrus and D’ni that I must write. For on that day, when the picture of the prophecies came clearly into my mind’s eye, I understood what only the Maker and the Great King had known. I saw the thread of happening that was stitched into every aspect of Atrus’s life to bring him to that plateau at that hour. From the very first of this great history that I have written, to these last words, the purpose of events can now be followed. From the most common occurrence—the death of Ti’ana’s father, which led to her journey down into D’ni—to the largest catastrophe—the fall of D’ni itself, which allowed for that unseen chamber to be discovered—it was all meant to be: to fulfill a greater good and vanquish a greater evil.

“And so, even as the prophecies speak of a great rebuilding, we now rebuild D’ni, not in the great cavern, but in a new Age—an Age that is surely among the finest Books ever written in all the great history of D’ni. And it is the survivors of the old D’ni who will build that new Age. An Age of beauty and perfection and wonder that would take as many volumes to describe as I have yet written.

“But you who have found my histories should know this last thing, for I have written these things only so that they might be known to future seekers, whether they be of D’ni or human origin—that Atrus and I live quietly on Tomahna, with a new daughter, Yeesha, cousin to Marrim’s little Anna. And I rejoice and cry for joy when I dream of the life behind and the blessings of what is yet to come.

“And Atrus? He writes but does not lead. He advises but does not command. He wonders and seeks to understand. He loves life and quietly moves to the mark that the Maker has set for him.”

About the Authors, Writers, and Translation Team

Robyn Miller and his brother Rand made their first trip to the D’ni caverns back in 1993. Little did they know that the grand adventure would become the catalyst for the award-winning Myst “franchise”—a series of computer games, novels, and more, based on the D’ni history. With help from a team of translators and writers, including Richard Watson, Chris Brandkamp, Ryan Miller, and Richard Vander Wende, a simple collection

of D’ni journals came to life in story form. The story continues to unfold, as members of the team working at Cyan Worlds in Spokane, Washington, bring more and more of the rich D’ni history to light for eager explorers.

David Wingrove, living with his lovely family in London, is author of the successful *Chung Kuo* series of novels, and won the prestigious Hugo and Locus Awards for best non-fiction work in the science fiction genre.